

**KING ME! Alberta Drag King Performance, 1997-2016: Examining Constituency Audiences and The  
Communicative Functions of Gender**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**  
in  
Performance Studies

Faculty of Physical Education & Recreation and Department of Drama  
University of Alberta

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## Abstract

When it comes to issues of sexual diversity specifically within Canada, Alberta's history demonstrates a track record of extreme social conservatism and intense policy battles over sexual minority rights. Prior to 2015, the Alberta government consistently "resisted the inclusion of GLBT people into public sphere policy-formation" (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 1-2), and Albertan legal and political discourses on gender and sexuality consistently placed queers and gender non-conformists as *not normal* Albertans (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). These kinds of discourses follow centuries-long history in the North American legal system's treatment of sexual and gender minorities, which includes but is not limited to anti-cross-dressing, sodomy, and anti-gay statutes in American and Canadian contexts (Warner, 2002; Stryker, 2008; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004; Sutherland, 2000; Weeks, 1977; Jackson & Persky, 1982; Feinberg, 1996; Kimmel & Robinson, 2001). As a community theatre practice, we must understand *drag* as enmeshed within these socio-political contexts in which queers live, struggle, and survive. Drag, both queening and kinging, has always been a response to the legal and social regulation of gender and sexuality. In multiple ways, drag performers engage in drag as a way of going *inside* to a safer space because of their experiences in the *outside* world, both in public spaces and with family. Drag kings have been popularly understood as female lesbians dressing up as men; however, they can more accurately and contemporarily be described as anyone, regardless of gender or sex, intentionally performing masculinity. In this dissertation, I use performance ethnography and auto-ethnography to document the experiences of drag kings, including myself, who have performed in Alberta between 1997 and 2016, and to explore the role of drag in our lives. I interviewed two cultural elders and 19 drag kings from four drag king troupes spanning three decades investigating the following questions: What kind of transformations or realizations about identity and masculinity take place, if any, through drag king performance (and why)? How/why does drag kinging offer space for gender experimentation within the lgbttq+ community? What do these interviews reveal about the connections and/or tensions between drag kinging and transgender communities? One of the overarching storylines that emerges within these drag king

stories is the experience of self-discovery, experimentation, and new possibilities through drag kinging. There was a sense that, through drag performances and engagement with drag communities, participants could safely play with transgression; many interviewees were able to increase their self-confidence as well as develop and express their politics and gender presentations/identities in daily life. For some, drag was a lifeline for survival. In this study, I employ the concepts of *constituency audiences* (Defraeye, 1994), *liminality* (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1986, 1992), *disidentification* (Muñoz, 1999), and the *natural attitude* (Bettcher, 2007) to analyze the experiences of these drag kings and to theorize why and how drag king performance functions as a space for personal transformation and political resistance (and/or conformity) in a distinctly anti-lgbtq+ socio-political context. In doing so, I analyze the complex impulses and effects of drag kinging as a personal, performative, and political practice. This dissertation reveals how drag kinging offers (or doesn't offer) space for reimagining the normative communicative functions of gender; the complex layers of performativity that kings negotiate; and what it means to align oneself with certain kinds of masculinity while simultaneously critiquing them. These stories and analyses not only reveal interesting theoretical, political, and ethical tensions in the performative practice of drag kinging, but they also illustrate the value of community theatre for minority groups.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Angela (Pony) M. Meyer. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, under the project name “Queer performance spaces & practices: an exploration of drag kinging & transgender-queer experiences,” No. Pro00038711, 2014.

Some of this thesis has been published as Meyer, A.M. (2013). Drag Kinging with Ben&Pony. *Alt. Theatre: Cultural diversity and the stage*, 10(3), p. 14-19. Parts of this publication can be found in Interlude Two – Queer Unicorns, including images. The following images were also included in this publication: Image 49: Randy & Dennis on 95 St./Jasper Ave., 2012, Photo by Shirl Tse; Image 59: White-Stuffy-Femme & Proper-White-Gent at Louise McKinney Riverfront Park, Edmonton, 2012, photographer Shirley Tse; and Image 60: White-Stuffy-Femme & Proper-White-Gent at Louise McKinney Riverfront Park, Edmonton, 2012, photo by Shirley Tse. Some description and analyses of these images from this publication can be found in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my supervisors and supervisory committee for their intellectual guidance, patience, and encouragement. I would like to thank and acknowledge my partner – Laine Wannechko; I could not have completed this long and challenging journey without their multi-faceted support and patience. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Theresa Dextrase for all the many ways she supported me during this process. Thanks to Dawn Dextrase's and Dana Miller's therapeutic massage in helping keep my body pain manageable. Thanks to all the participants who gave their time and shared their stories. Thanks to Edmonton queer communities, especially Queer Royale Drag Troupe, for teaching me so much along the way.

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## Glossary of Terms

**Boi:** can refer to a number of different gender/sexual identities within lgbttq+ contexts. Usually refers to someone who was assigned female at birth who no longer identifies solely as a female, a girl, or a woman, but rather (or also) with some form of masculinity. Bois may or may not identify as transgender or transsexual, but usually identify as lesbian, dyke, or queer. Boi may also refer to someone who partners sexually with an older “daddy.” Bois are typically considered to be young (under 40), but not necessarily.

**Butch:** a person who embodies culturally-defined masculine characteristics. Within lesbian contexts, butch usually refers to a person who identifies as female and who adopts masculine styles and ways of being (which may or may not be normative). In gay male contexts, butch can refer to a biologically male person who adopts masculine styles and ways of being (sometimes similar to heterosexual masculinity).

**Cisgender:** cisgender people are those who live a gender role that is viewed by society as continuous with their childhood gender and aligned with their assigned sex.

**Femme:** a person who embodies culturally-defined feminine characteristics. In lesbian contexts, this usually refers to someone who identifies as female and who expresses herself with feminine dress and ways of being. Femmes may adopt normative feminine styles or they may create their own “queer femme” styles. Femmes can also identify as genderqueer.

**LGBTQ+:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, two-spirit, and queer. There are many iterations of this acronym. Some of those iterations might add another “I” for intersexed, a “P” for pansexual, and/or a “Q” for questioning.

**Gender-bending:** a form of gender expression that often challenges gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations.

**Gender-fucking:** the conscious effort to subvert traditional notions of gender identity and gender roles (from *to fuck with*, as in *to mess with, tweak*).

**Genderqueer:** an inclusive term for those whose sexual and gender expressions transgress normative definitions. Usually refers to a range of gender identifications outside the man-woman or male-female binaries. Some people use this identity term to describe themselves as not having a gender, having an overlap (or indefinite lines) of genders, having two or more genders, moving between genders, and so on. Transgender and genderqueer are not mutually exclusive identity categories.

**Gender Dysphoria:** a technical/psychological term for people who are dissatisfied with the gender assigned to them at birth on the basis of their anatomical sex. Although it can be used purely as a descriptive term, most psychological communities also consider gender dysphoria as a disorder with connotations of neurosis and psychological impairment (see The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) Five and earlier iterations of the DSM).

**Gay:** usually refers to men who prefer fucking, loving, being intimate with, and/or partnering with other men. However, gay also refers to women who prefer fucking, loving, being intimate with, and/or partnering with other women. Gay is usually synonymous with homosexual.

**Homosexual:** a term used to describe romantic and/or sexual attraction and/or behaviours between

members of the same sex and/or gender. This term has been used in a number of different contexts including medical, academic, media, and political contexts. It can be used synonymously with gay or lesbian, but historically the term homosexual was very much associated with gay men. Today, many do not use homosexual for self-identification because of the historical connotations associated with “disorder.” But it is often used for comedic and campy purposes. In this text, I use homosexual when referring to historical contexts in which the term was more widely used. Additionally, Foucault’s (1978a) mapping of the “homosexual” as a “species” compels us to understand homosexuality as a historical category that emerged in particular social and medical contexts rather than the discovery of a repressed identity waiting to surface.

**Intersectional feminism:** examines the overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination (and privilege) that women face; this includes more than just gender and extends to race, ethnicity, sexuality, economic background, experiences of disability, and many other axes.

**Lesbian:** a woman who prefers fucking, loving, being intimate with, and/or partnering with other women. Lesbian is sometimes used synonymously with homosexual but defining lesbians as “female homosexuals” can indicate the masculine coding of homosexual as well as the de-politicization of lesbian as an identity category.

**Masculinity:** It’s difficult to define masculinity without a qualifying adjective in front of the term (e.g. toxic, hegemonic, minority, white, female, trans). Often masculinity without these qualifiers is conceptualized as stable white male middle-class masculinity in which all other kinds of masculinities are alternatives or “others.” The general traits associated with masculinity might include aspects such as power, privilege, extreme self-reliance, independence, inheritance, roughness, physical strength, domination, emotionless, lack of fear and vulnerability, courage, bravery, confidence, bravado, competence, and taking up space. It’s also difficult to separate masculinity from a history of oppression of women. The drag king phenomena, in part, is about questioning the presumed naturalness of masculinity as being solely the domain of male bodies. In this dissertation, masculinity is an unstable construct that drag kings play with in order critique this naturalness and contribute to its construction in queer ways.

**Non-binary:** often used synonymously with genderqueer. Both terms are often used as umbrella terms for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine (male or female)—identities which are outside the gender binary and cisnormativity.

**Queer:** in popular discourse, this is an inclusive or “umbrella” identity term for lesbian, gay, transgender, transsexual, and intersex people. However, queer is also a political and theoretical term referring to non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity, existing in space and time.

**Toxic Masculinity:** this term refers to when the general traits of masculinity (listed above) are taken to the extreme. It’s a specific model of manhood geared toward complete dominance and control. This kind of masculinity devalues women and emotions and overvalues extreme self-reliance. Toxic masculinity is a driving factor behind violence and violent crimes, specifically domestic violence; some contend this kind of masculinity is also a driving factor in homophobia, mass shootings, and extremist ideologies.

**Transgender:** an identity term that refers to the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place. Does not necessarily refer to a particular destination or mode of transition. However, transgender sometimes references bodies that have not been surgically or hormonally altered (differentiating from transsexual).

**Transsexual:** an identity term that refers to the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place (i.e. a boundary of sexual difference). Does not necessarily refer to a particular destination or mode of transition. However, transsexual usually references bodies that have been surgically or hormonally altered (differentiating from transgender).

**Transvestism:** cross-dressing by any sex or gender; typically refers to people dressing in clothing and adopting mannerisms of the “opposite sex,” regardless of sexuality. Contemporarily, the term often refers to heterosexual males who wear feminine clothing (who may prefer the term cross-dresser). Magnus Hirschfeld is credited with originally coining the term “transvestite” in his book, *Die Transvestiten*. At that time, transvestite encompassed a much broader spectrum of people including some transgender people. Transvestism does not imply fetishism, but there are people out there who get their kicks from the practice.

## Introduction

The North American legal system has consistently criminalized the lives of sexual and gender minorities while simultaneously rendering them invisible. We can observe this discourse of criminalization and invisibility from 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-cross-dressing and sodomy laws (Warner, 2002; Stryker, 2008; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004; Sutherland, 2000; Weeks, 1977; Jackson & Persky, 1982; Feinberg, 1996; Kimmel & Robinson, 2001) to more contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century anti-lgbtq+ legislation around same-sex marriage, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances [ASGSA], 2009), bathroom bills, human rights (Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Amendment Act [HRCMAA], 2009), “gross indecency,” and “bawdy houses” (Bawdy-House Law, 1981). These legislative moves in the United States and Canada demonstrate attempts to not only control and regulate but also to villainize non-heterosexuality, transsexuality, sadomasochism, non-monogamy, non-procreative sex, non-marital sex, and commercial sex. When it comes to issues of sexual diversity specifically within Canada, Alberta’s history demonstrates a track record of extreme social conservatism and intense policy battles over sexual minority rights. Prior to 2015, the Alberta government consistently “resisted the inclusion of GLBT people into public sphere policy-formation” (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 1-2), and Albertan legal and political discourses on gender and sexuality consistently placed queers and gender non-conformists as *not normal* Albertans (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012).

As a community theatre practice, we must understand *drag* as enmeshed within these socio-political contexts in which queers live, struggle, and survive. In multiple ways, kings engage in drag as a way of going *inside* to a safer space because of their experiences in the *outside* world, both in public spaces and with family. The tradition of gay bars and drag spaces as an alternative public space that provides a kind of refuge is important to understand when making sense of the role of drag plays in the lives of many queer and non-binary people. In Canada and the United States, the degree to which these kinds of spaces have been necessary for queers to survive and engage in social life has arguably declined significantly over the last 40–50 years as societal acceptance of lgbtq+ people has increased. Thus, we might expect that queers and gender non-conformists no longer need them. Surprisingly, however, this is simply not the case. The stage,

historically and contemporarily, continues to offer explorations and reformulations of gender and sexuality in ways that are not always acceptable transgressions in daily life.

Historically, drag goes back to at least Shakespearean theatre times. More specifically, we can trace both drag queen and drag king performance back to early forms of female and male impersonation in the mid-1800s in Western European and North American contexts. Although today we would consider both genres of impersonation highly conventional, these impersonators, along with the frame of the stage, did reveal the possibility of gender-switching, which opened the doors for experimentation for both performers and audiences (Senelick, 1993, p. 93). While we can find obscure references to “king” in 1965 referring to a “(gay) masculine lesbian” (Green, 2010, p. 1223) and “drag butch” in 1972 referring to a woman/lesbian who dresses as a man (Newton, 1979a; Green, 2010, p. 1738), the drag king phenomena in North America didn’t emerge with full force until the 1990s (Best, 1996; Green, 2010, p. 1738; Halberstam, 1997, 1998; Maltz, 1998; Shiller, 1996; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Waters & Dick, 1997). Drag Kings have been popularly understood as female lesbians dressing up as men; however, they can more accurately and contemporarily be described as anyone, regardless of gender or sex, intentionally performing masculinity.

Drag, both queening and kinging, has always been a response to the legal and social regulation of gender and sexuality. As Les(lie) Feinberg writes: “The public organization of gay drag life has attracted masculine females and feminine males who are brutally oppressed because of the degree of their gender expression” (1998, p. 24). Drag kinging’s not-so-linear trajectory, including male impersonation, public cross-dressing, and butch masculinities, is intimately tied to women’s/feminist movements, to developments in queer theory, to women’s ability to survive independently of men, to dress reform, to the symbolic power of “breeches,” and to mainstream ideas around the “naturalness” and non-performative nature of masculinity. Halberstam (1998) writes that “on and off the stage, cross dressing women in the early twentieth century . . . began a steady assault on the naturalness of male masculinity” and the development of public displays of “signs and symbols of an eroticized and often (but not inevitably) politicized female masculinity” (p. 233).

While both drag queens and drag kings have contributed significantly to queer performance, political

activism, art, and culture, queens have enjoyed much more popularity than drag kings, and until recently, most of the scholarly work has focused on drag queens. However, when the mini-explosion in drag kinging occurred in the 1990s, an influx of scholarly work on the genre shortly followed suit. There are now drag king troupes in most large cities across North America, and in smaller ones as well. Importantly, scholars have highlighted how drag king performance offers space for critiquing dominant masculinities and expressing and celebrating relationships to and positive receptions of female masculinities, transmasculinities, and queer sexualities (Troka, Lebesco, & Noble, 2002; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Halberstam, 1998; Baur, 2002; Escudero-Alías, 2010; Shapiro, 2007). Much of this research has focused on discovering the political and theoretical potential of drag kinging to disrupt the gender binary—a valuable feminist and queer agenda. Although these studies are important and although many scholars who write about drag kinging have also performed as drag kings, there are only a handful of in-depth qualitative interview projects with drag kings (Shapiro, 2007; Hasten 1999; Halberstam, 1999; Berbary & Johnson, 2017), and very little looks specifically at the role of drag kinging in the lives of kings themselves (Shapiro, 2007; Berbary & Johnson, 2017; Barnett & Johnson, 2013) or attempts to capture the changing yet enduring role of kinging over the course of several decades in a single location (except Bobbie Noble, 2006, in Toronto).

## **Research Questions**

In this dissertation, I use performance ethnography and auto-ethnography as my main methodological approaches; I use these approaches to document the experiences of drag kings, including myself, who have performed in Alberta between 1997 and 2016, and to explore the role of drag in our lives. I interviewed two cultural elders and 19 drag kings from four drag king troupes spanning three decades. My research questions are based on my review of scholarly work on drag kings, my involvement with the creation of the Edmonton Queer Royale Drag Troupe, my observations of and conversations with other drag kings, and my personal experiences as both a drag king and a non-binary person. My research questions include:

- 1) What role does drag kinging play in the lives of Albertan drag kings?

- What kind of transformations or realizations about identity and masculinity take place, if any, through drag king performance (and why)?
- 2) How/why does drag kinging offer space for gender experimentation within the lgbttq+ community?
  - 3) What do these interviews reveal about the connections and/or tensions between drag kinging and transgender communities?

One of the overarching storylines that emerges within these drag king stories is the experience of self-discovery, validation, experimentation, and new possibilities through drag kinging. There was a sense that, through drag performances and engagement with drag communities, participants could safely play with transgression; many interviewees were able to increase their self-confidence as well as develop and express their politics and gender presentations/identities in daily life. For some, drag was a lifeline for survival. In this study, I employ the concepts of *constituency audiences* (Defraeye, 1994), *liminality* (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1986, 1992), *disidentification* (Muñoz, 1999), and the *natural attitude* (Bettcher, 2007) to analyze the experiences of these drag kings and to theorize why and how drag king performance functions as a space for personal transformation and political resistance (and/or conformity) in a distinctly anti-lgbttq+ socio-political context. In doing so, I analyze the complex impulses and effects of drag kinging as a personal, performative, and political practice. This dissertation reveals how drag kinging offers (or doesn't offer) space for reimagining the normative communicative functions of gender; the complex layers of performativity that kings negotiate; and what it means to align oneself with certain kinds of masculinity while simultaneously critiquing them.

It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to our understandings of drag king culture, particularly the relatively unknown legacy of drag kinging in Alberta, Canada. I believe this nuanced account contributes to a queer cultural archive for people whose queer history is often lost in obscurity. These stories not only reveal interesting theoretical, political, and ethical tensions in the performative practice of drag kinging, but they also illustrate the value of community theatre for minority groups.

## Outline of Chapters

The following study is structured into six main chapters with two performative interludes. Following this introduction, Chapter One reviews the relevant literature for framing this study. I first document the anti-cross-dressing, sodomy, and anti-gay statutes in American and Canadian contexts and how these regulations affected gender and sexual minorities. Following this, I trace the historical trajectory of drag queening and kinging from the late 1800s to the present in order to offer a broader understanding of drag in relation to the socio-political contexts in which these genres emerged. I offer an extensive review of drag king work to provide readers with a sense of the scholarly traditions I build upon.

Chapter Two outlines my methodological approaches, choices, and processes, as well as my theoretical frameworks for analysis. In Chapter Two, I describe my two main approaches (performance ethnography and auto-ethnography) and my interviewing processes, as well as reflect on issues of positionality and consent. Chapter Two also outlines my theoretical questions; I ask how drag kinging might re-imagine the communicative function of gender presentation and what the implications of this re-imagining might be. To this end, I employ the theorists Talia Mae Bettcher (2007), Victor Turner (1969, 1982a), and José Muñoz (1999); together, these theorists help us make sense of how and why drag king performance create opportunities for individual agency (but also conformity to gender norms), and why sexual and gender minorities seek and need such spaces.

In Chapter Three, I examine the conservative anti-lgbtq+ policy initiatives and actions from the 1980s to 2016 in Alberta, Canada to demonstrate the sense of socio-political marginality experienced by interviewees. Chapter Four sets the ethnographic context and documents Edmonton's Drag King Legacy from 1997 to 2016 as an example of evolving feminist politics within the Edmonton queer community and within the broader hyper-conservative environment of Alberta. Following Chapter Four, I weave together two analysis chapters with two performative interludes. Interludes One and Two document my drag and boilesque performances through writing, live performance links, and photographs. Chapters Five and Six engage the theoretical ideas from Chapter Two (i.e., liminality, natural attitude, communicative function of

gender, disidentification) with the ethnographic and auto-ethnographic material from Chapters Three and Four, Interludes One and Two, and Appendix A. Appendix A is a Drag Journal that explores the experiences of drag kings in Alberta through the genre of creative non-fiction<sup>1</sup>. In Chapter Five, I analyze drag kinging as a liminal space; here, I look specifically at the role of constituency audiences for drag king performers and how these audiences affect the communicative function of gender, experiences of validation, and the usefulness of drag as a political tool. Chapter Six examines play and the specific performance practices of drag kinging and how kings negotiate and reflect upon the complex layers of desire, identity, and accessing male power. In the conclusion, I summarize by addressing the research questions as well as discussing limitations and areas for future research and potential contributions of this project.

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<sup>1</sup> The Drag Journal is another form of performance, which I've placed in the Appendix because much of my analyses depends on this piece of performative writing. The 20-page Drag Journal is written from the perspective of Phoenix – a composite character I created from 20 interviewees, including myself.

## Chapter One — Literature Review

To understand drag kinging, I first outline some of the lgbttq+ subcultural contexts and history from which this genre of performance was born. Although it's beyond the scope of this research to provide a comprehensive lgbttq+ history, I do wish to provide context with what I believe are relevant parts of that history as they relate to framing the development and contemporary meanings of drag king performance. Similar to how Susan Stryker (2008) reveals the interconnectedness of transgender politics and the history of homosexual persecution, drag needs to be “understood as part of an overarching set of struggles about privacy, censorship, political dissent, minority rights, freedom of expression, and sexual liberation” (p. 52).

Using mainly secondary sources, I begin by taking a look at some of the anti-cross-dressing, sodomy, and anti-gay statutes in American and Canadian contexts and how these regulations affected gender and sexual minorities. It's true that drag on stage can be very different from cross-dressing in the streets, and not all cross-dressers are necessarily gay. Whereas cross-dressing is not necessarily a sign of queerness, contemporary drag definitely is. Cross-dressing and drag also share much of the same history of persecution and ideological underpinnings concerned with the predominant understandings and regulation of the sex-gender system. Following this, I trace the etymology and history of drag from late-1800s theatre references and the emergence of the male and female impersonation genres. I then trace the terms drag queen and drag king as specific subcultural compounds of drag and offer a broader understanding of drag as a performance of a social role, typically an intentional performance of a gendered role. After a brief synopsis of drag queening, their history, and of the performance genre, I give a comprehensive review of drag kinging. This review includes the unique development of the genre in relation to feminism, queer theory, female masculinity, and lesbian and gay subcultural contexts. I outline the who, where, what, how, and why of drag kinging, as well as provide an overview of the development of scholarly work on this phenomenon. From here, I narrow my review to focus on the relationships between drag kinging and gender identity/expression, including discussions on identity transformation, masculinity, and shifting gender subjectivities.

## Historical Regulation of Dress, Cross-Dressing, and Sodomy

In the United States and Canada, before dress reform and the gay rights movement, the state historically viewed cross-dressing and homosexuality as a direct affront to the social order.<sup>2</sup> State attempts to police and regulate binary gender roles and heterosexuality (via dress codes and sodomy laws, for example) clearly demonstrate just how important the sex-gender system was within this social order. Outlining this context is critical for understanding the conditions in which drag developed and the transgressions that drag *can* represent, as well as the worlds in which many drag queens, cross-dressers, butches, and transgender and transsexual people lived prior to dress reform, gay rights, and transgender social reform. State-sanctioned persecution of both queers and cross-dressers highlights not only the restrictions on freedom of expression, but also the importance of passing as a matter of survival for many queers. And although the history of drag culture is not without its problems (e.g., trans-antagonism, racism, misogyny, etc.), I would argue that the spirit of drag can still embody these shared memories of resistance.

Since at least the medieval and early modern periods, clothing has been an important signifier of status and location in Western society. Throughout these periods, for example, sumptuary laws were widespread all over Europe in order to regulate class or other social transgressions, or more simply, “who wore what, and on what occasion” and to “keep *down* social climbers” (Garber, 1992, p. 21, p. 23). Senelick notes, despite secret “drag balls” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most European cities had civil statutes prohibiting public cross-dressing (1993, p. 89). Adopting British regulations, Canada also had severe penalties in place for sodomy beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and continued to regulate gender presentation and sexuality well into the 1980s (Warner,

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<sup>2</sup> For a more literary and popular cultural analysis of cultural anxiety around and fascination with cross-dressing, see Marjorie Garber’s (1992) *Vested interests: cross-dressing & cultural anxiety*.

2002, p. 19). Dating back to the colonial period in the United States, municipal ordinances forbade people from wearing clothing associated with a particular social rank or profession as well as cross-racial impersonation (Stryker, 2008, pp. 32–33). By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, waves of municipal ordinances began banning cross-dressing as well. Before dress reform (1850–1920), dress codes were particularly stringent for women of all classes in the United States and Canada.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, legal regulations during this time sought to protect public health and purity from the deviancy of the homosexual, which included effeminate men, butch women, cross-dressers, and others.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a new era of dress and gender regulation emerged. We can understand this new era of regulation as response to the growth of scientific discourse on homosexuality and so-called gender inversion, the promotion of dress reform by both feminist and health advocates, and increasing industrialization (Stryker, 2008, pp. 33–34; Foucault, 1978a; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004; Sutherland, 2000). In the 1850s, city ordinances banning cross-dressing began to spread across the United States, making it illegal for a person to appear in public “in a dress not belonging to his or her sex” (Stryker, 2008, p. 31; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004, p. 1423; Sutherland, 2000, p. 134). During this time, state “disguise” laws also targeted cross-dressers (Sutherland, 2000, p. 134; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004, p. 1423). Not surprisingly, those most targeted were butch lesbians and gay female impersonators (Sutherland, 2000).<sup>4</sup> When considering the impetus for

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<sup>3</sup> Dress reformers, who came from various perspectives and professions, had three major platforms: 1) women’s clothing, especially fashionable clothing was harmful to a person’s health; 2) women’s clothing represented women’s political and economic oppression; and 3) women’s clothing was aesthetically displeasing and inhibited “natural beauty.” For more see: Cunningham, P. (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Given the disproportionate numbers of people of colour who continue to be incarcerated and harassed by police in the U.S. (Davis, 1998), it seems likely that those most targeted among gender variant people were also likely people of

these anti-cross-dressing laws, it's possible that both city and state laws shared the common interests in preventing fraud or deceit (i.e., disguising oneself to engage in criminal activity); however, it's more likely these laws were an extension of already-existing ideologies around morality, sex, gender, and race. In conjunction with sodomy laws and anti-obscenity laws, anti-cross-dressing and disguise statutes became another way of policing morality and gender/sexual deviance in public spaces.

Although there doesn't appear to be a direct Canadian equivalent to these anti-cross-dressing ordinances (in the statutes), the police did regularly harass gender and sexual dissidents, and the anti-gay, sodomy, indecency, and obscenity laws in place negatively affected the lives of gender and sexual minorities well into the 1980s (Warner, 2002). For the most part, these laws have colonial roots. Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Britain adopted the church's stance on "homosexual acts" with a formal statute against the "Abominable Act of Buggary" (Warner, 2002, p. 18). The penalty for this crime was death until 1861 when it was replaced with 10 years to life in prison (Weeks, 1977, p. 14). Beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Canada adopted British laws regulating sexuality into the Criminal Code of Canada, and by 1859, The Consolidated Statutes of Canada included buggery as a crime punishable by death (Warner, 2002, p. 19). After being reclassified in 1892 as one of the "Offences Against Morality," anti-gay amendments to the criminal code continued to be added, including such labels as indecent assault, gross indecency, criminal sexual psychopath, and dangerous sexual offender.<sup>5</sup> Most of these offences originally aimed to regulate male

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colour. However, I have not yet found information specifically on the persecution of butch lesbians and female impersonators who were also people of colour.

<sup>5</sup> Sodomy and homosexuality were decriminalized in 1969 under *The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1968–1969*, introduced by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (*Journals of the House of Commons CXV*, 1968–69; <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/timeline-same-sex-rights-in-canada-1.1147516>). The amendments, however, only

homosexuality; lesbians were reportedly not included in the Criminal Code until the 1950s (Warner, p. 19). During the era of the “communist panic,” anti-homosexual amendments were also added to the Immigration Act in 1957, declaring homosexuals a prohibited class (Warner, 2002, p. 27; Jackson & Persky, 1982, p. 219). Both Toronto and Montréal police were notorious for harassing and assaulting gays and lesbians and raiding both public and private places where they congregated (Warner, 2002, p. 38). At Club Carousel in Calgary, there are also accounts of police raiding clubs and strip-searching queers to determine if they had on the appropriate number of gendered clothing; some women were even raped (Warner, 2002, p. 41). Although Bonnett (2006) doesn’t confirm these accounts, she does talk about the constant visits from police “vice squads” and conflicts between straight and gay clientele at Club Carousel, which was originally a disco that opened in Calgary in 1969 called “1207” (p. 120).<sup>6</sup> These accounts suggest that there were in fact laws (or interpretations of laws) against cross-dressing in Canada, but they were under the purview of another

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made anal sex legal when it was in private (not public), and when it was between no more than two consenting adults (Criminal Code (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46, Department of Justice Canada).

<sup>6</sup> Bonnett (2006) further explains that, “While the majority of gay bars in North America experienced constant harassment from ‘the men in blue’ during this time period, the relationship between Calgary gay bars and the police was paradoxical. While police were often quick to monitor and shut down gay clubs, the police themselves suggested a means to put an end to the harassment and charges. Following their suggestion, the owners of Club Carousel registered under the federal government’s Societies’ Act using the name The Scarth Street Society. Registration halted the majority of police harassment and charges . . . . With federal registration, the Scarth Street Society (SSS) was born, and the first ‘legal’ gay establishment emerged in Alberta. This example of police/community cooperation demonstrates how the authorities were willing to tolerate some gay spaces in the 1970s if they were kept out of the public’s (heterosexual) view” (p. 120–121).

ambiguous statute such as those pertaining to indecency.<sup>7</sup>

These laws and this harassment obviously made life difficult for gays, butches, cross-dressers, drag queens, drag butches, and transpeople at the time. The illegality of cross-dressing in public made passing in the straight world paramount for survival for many gender and sexually variant people. As Newton recalls, men who wanted to wear drag and avoid getting arrested must have been able to pass as a woman on the street, and yet many in fact did not pass (1979a, pp. 35–36). Leslie Feinberg who, after finding “refuge” as a trans teenager in the 1960s among drag queens, butches, and femmes in gay bars in Niagara Falls, Buffalo, and Toronto, recalls that his:

greatest terror was always when the police raided the bars, because they had the law on their side. They *were* the law. It wasn't just the tie I was wearing or the suit coat that made me vulnerable to arrest. I broke the law every time I dressed in fly front pants, or wore jockey shorts or t-shirts. The law dictated that I had to wear at least three pieces of 'women's' clothing. My drag queen sisters had to wear three pieces of 'men's' clothing. For all I know, that law may still be on the books in Buffalo today. (Feinberg, 1996, p. 8, *emphasis original*)

Zie describes further that cross-dressing laws extended beyond just clothing. Police used these laws to harass masculine women and feminine men (p. 8). Interestingly, Feinberg writes that, after being arrested, they were often not formally charged. I can't help but wonder if this practice (of not formally charging) could help explain the relative difficulty in finding historical cross-dressing convictions in law databases.<sup>8</sup> As Feinberg

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<sup>7</sup> The terms “gross indecency” and “indecent act” remained largely undefined in the Canadian Criminal Code at least as late as the early 1970s. This left their interpretation and enforcement in the hands of already anti-homosexual officials and courts (Warner, 2002, p. 19; Jackson & Persky, 1982, pp. 217-218; Kimmel & Robinson, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to my own challenges, others have noted this difficulty to varying degrees. Eskridge & Hunter (2004) note that after 1920, for example, arrests completely disappear from the records in St. Louis. And Stryker (2008) notes that

recalls, “All too often, the sentences were executed in the back seat of a police cruiser or on the cold cement floor of a precinct cell” (p. 8). In addition to this harassment, the police did arrest many people. In a 1939 raid on a New York City “Masque Ball,” for example, police arrested 99 presumed “men,” for wearing women’s clothing (Feinberg, 1996, p. 4). Undoubtedly, countless others suffered harassment and prosecution, as we know that at least 40 U.S. cities, including San Francisco, adopted these ordinances in at least 16 different states (Stryker, 2008, pp. 32–33); and both New York (1845) and California (1873) had implemented “disguise” laws which police used to arrest cross-dressers (Eskridge & Hunter, 2004, p. 1423).

Police still enforced anti-cross-dressing ordinances at least up until 1986 in St. Louis (perhaps the last city to hold on); however, judges eventually began ruling these charges invalid based either on “vagueness” or, in some cases, if the defendant could prove that his/her cross-dressing was a medical necessity (i.e., part of a medical regime for gender reassignment) (Eskridge & Hunter, 2004, p. 1430). By the 1970s, the rise in women’s liberation and gay pride “which had paved the way for unisex clothing and undercut the strength of a rigid cross-dressing taboo” (Eskridge & Hunter, 2004, p. 1430), helped further the dissolution and decline of these laws. Interestingly, as part of the 1969 Canadian Criminal Code reform, shifting paradigmatic ideas of homosexuality—from a legal and criminal issue to a medical and scientific one—also played a major role in the decriminalization of homosexuality and its attendant act of “gross indecency” (Kimmel & Robinson, 2001). However, the discourse of “homosexuality as a mental disorder” continued to affect state regulation of gender and sexual dissidents in Canada and the United States. By the 1960s and onward, the use of “expert knowledge, techniques, and strategies were used to [create] and [categorize] social and individual identities,

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there is “very little historical research that helps us explain why cross-dressing became a social issue in need of regulation in the 1850s” (p. 33).

behavior, types, and desires, which in turn [could] be subjected to more optimal forms of governance” (Kimmel & Robinson, 2001, para. 11). Non-normative identities and bodies thus became governed at the population level via mental health categorizations (e.g., “disorders”) and state administrative binary categorizations of gender, sex, and sexuality. These kinds of binaries in fact extend beyond the state; they are woven into the very fabric of social organization.

Despite the decline of these oppressive laws, their effects and origins extend well beyond their reign. They represent just one piece of a pervasive ideological puzzle that demonizes and demoralizes gender and sexual minorities who do not conform to normative (and virtuous) gendered and sexual practices. As Gayle Rubin wrote in her 1982 germinal essay, “Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality,”

Periods such as the 1880s in England, and the 1950s in the United States, recodify the relations of sexuality. The struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, and ideologies which then affect the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded. (2011, p. 144)

### **What is Drag? Etymology and Historical Roots**

“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” ~ RuPaul (1995)

In this section, I’d like to outline the development of drag from its early theatrical roots to its contemporary locations in queer subcultures. The scope of this historical overview is narrowed specifically to anglophone North American contexts.

The word *drag* first appeared in print as early as 1870<sup>9</sup> (*OED Online*, drag, n.d.), and although its etymological origins are debated, many suggest that it came from theatre slang referring to the sensation of

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<sup>9</sup> Found in *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 29 May 5/5: “We shall come in drag.”

long skirts, worn by men, trailing on the floor (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, drag, n.d.; Green, 2010, pp. 1736–1737). Senelick argues that this connotation had filtered down from the phrase “putting on the drag,” i.e., “applying the brake on a coach,” which was slang used by thieves of the time (2000, p. 302). Eric Partridge dates “to go on the drag or flash the drag,” i.e., to wear female attire to solicit men, to around 1850, although when it entered theatrical parlance is uncertain (Senelick, 2000, p. 302). In these early references and up until the 1900s, there appears to be no explicit ideological links between drag and homosexuality. In fact, early practices of drag may have rarely served as examples of gender-bending or gender transgression (Senelick, 1993; Halladay, 2004). Cross-dressing characters in English theatre contexts prior to the 1850s, for example, typically remained unsexed: adult men in skirts as figures of fun, and less commonly, women in breeches as young boys, or principal boys (Senelick, 1993, p. 81).

In the late 1860s, female impersonation emerged more fully as a theatrical specialty in minstrel shows, but the style was no longer based on the “frumpy old woman” or “the funny old gal,” but rather on serious impersonations of the femininity of the time (Hamilton, 1993, p. 110). During this era, despite the fact that cross-dressing in the streets would elicit prosecution and harassment, many of these performers enjoyed incredible fame and notoriety from this respectable and very popular tradition. As part of family-friendly vaudeville shows, up until the 1930s female impersonation was seemingly all about wholesomeness, and to the public eye, this form of theatre was not a part of queer social life (Hamilton, 1993, p. 108). During this time, in British and North American contexts, some argue that closeted celebrity female impersonators vehemently denied connections to homosexuality (Smith, 1994, p. 237). Drag in these contexts often reaffirmed and celebrated traditional middle-class gender and sexual norms and the mass appeal of

impersonation at this time was illusion. Like other female impersonators of this era, The Jewel Box Revue,<sup>10</sup> a group of 25 female impersonators and one male impersonator (Stormé DeLarverie), toured nationally for over 30 years,<sup>11</sup> and billed their shows as “family entertainment” that featured “amazing deception” and “femme-mimics” (Drorbaugh, 1993). By focusing on the illusion and the deception as acts of artistry rather than as extensions of what might be an already effeminate man or a masculine woman, the group assured audiences that the masculinity of the man or the femininity of the woman underneath the drag was not undermined.

We see similar reaffirmations of normative gender and sex values with the drag troupes that served as entertainment for the Canadian military during the First World War and the Second World War (Halladay, 2004). These troupes were composed of actual Canadian soldiers, but their performances, like most female impersonation during this time, were more a part of the broader theatrical tradition of minstrel shows and commonly included blackface in conjunction with drag. In 1928, Mae West’s Broadway play, *Pleasure Man*, challenged the popular understanding of female impersonators as illusionists and presented them as “they really are,” which was, according to the play, flamboyantly effeminate and homosexual (Hamilton, 1993, pp. 111–12). After the debut performance of *Pleasure Man* at the Biltmore Theatre in New York, police raided and arrested the entire cast and charged them with indecency.<sup>12</sup> Although West’s intentions have been characterized as exploitative and self-serving, her play did reveal the lives and subcultural slang of New York’s gay community, as well as a more “underground tradition of female impersonation . . . that had existed as

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<sup>10</sup> For archival photos of The Jewel Box Revue, see: <http://queermusicheritage.com/fem-jewl.html>

<sup>11</sup> Jewel Box Revue toured the United States from the late 1930s to the early 1970s.

<sup>12</sup> New York Times, 1928:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9E05E3D6113AE132A05751C0A9669D946995D6CF>

long as vaudeville's" but was found in places like burlesque theatres and concert saloons of the city's slums (Hamilton, 1993, pp. 114–15). Entertaining mostly working-class men, this underworld impersonator, or the "fairy impersonator," advertised his "illicit offstage sexual self" rather than attempting any kind of skilled performance (Hamilton, 1993, pp. 115–16). Although critics accused West of fabricating connections between female impersonation and deviant sexual communities, there was ample evidence to the contrary, including official accounts from vice investigators.<sup>13</sup>

Male impersonation, although much less common than female impersonation, enjoyed a similar golden age during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Berube 1990, p. 72; Senelick, 1982, p. 33). This was a time of intense change and transition for women (mostly white women) in western society. In the midst of women's suffrage and dress reform, women were increasingly questioning their place in society. More women were entering the workforce, challenging middle-class stereotypes of the passionless woman, and promoting the role of women in public spheres. In fact, wearing trousers in public at this time was a political act for women. Although it was grounded primarily in health reform,<sup>14</sup> it was an act that elicited street harassment and ridicule (Cunningham, 2003, pp. 31–33). Drorbaugh suggests "the theater may have offered spectators some latitude for imagining more elastic social roles, accounting for some of the popularity

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<sup>13</sup> For an example report from a vice investigator, see Hamilton, 1993, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Health reformers were concerned primarily with the ill effects caused by the heavy weight of women's clothing and the constriction of the tight-laced corset, arguing that "corsets adversely affected internal organs, that long skirts swept up filthy debris from the streets, that the weight of the skirts and petticoats impaired movement, that uneven temperatures caused by clothing brought on sickness, and, finally that faulty suspension of garments put undue stress on the anatomy" (Cunningham, 2003, p. 24).

of the male impersonator and cross-dressed actresses” (1993, p. 125). Reportedly more accepted in America,<sup>15</sup> male impersonation rose to the stage in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and typically played off English music hall or African American blues and jazz traditions. The genre of male impersonation differs from previous appearances by women on the stage in the boy tradition, who played sailors or schoolboys, in that they instead wore fashionable *adult* male clothing (Senelick, 1993, p. 90). Brought to New York stages from England in 1867, Annie Hindle, perhaps the first woman to specialize in male impersonation, even grew a moustache and beard stubble (Senelick, 1993, pp. 90–91). Hindle also married a woman and enjoyed a successful 15-year career. She paved the way for a number of other male impersonators such as Ella Wesner, Vesta Tilley, and Stormé DeLarverie.

As the MC for the Jewel Box Revue (JBR) from 1955 to 1969, Stormé DeLarverie was the only male impersonator among its 25 female impersonators (Drorbaugh, 1993). After beginning her work with the JBR, she began dressing in men’s clothing both on and off the stage, thus suggesting that her relationship to masculinity, like that of other female impersonators, may have extended beyond the stage. DeLarverie’s work as a male impersonator occurred much later than the turn of the century golden age, making her perhaps the closest (temporally speaking), to the drag king. Unlike her predecessors, DeLarverie was also a lgbttq+ activist and participated in the initial Stonewall riots.<sup>16</sup> Her performances, like other male and female impersonators,

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<sup>15</sup> Senelick suggests that “America offered a more receptive scope for the growth of male impersonation because, traditionally, women were more welcome in active professions especially with their men at war, and the frontier provided a chance of upward mobility by means of transvestism” (1993, p. 89). Two examples of “active professions” in this context include mining and military work.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Stormé DeLarverie, see Michelle Parkerson’s film *Stormé: the Lady of the Jewel Box*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\\_6W6hEzzFM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_6W6hEzzFM)

allowed her to wear cross-gender attire on stage and imitate the behaviours and mannerisms of the “opposite” sex. However, both genres of impersonation were still highly conventional and were usually viewed as primarily acting without direct relation to their daily lives. Nonetheless, these impersonators, along with the frame of the stage, did reveal the possibility of gender-switching (Senelick, 1993, p. 93).

By the mid-1920s, as vaudeville became less popular, so did the genre of gender impersonation (Drorbaugh, 1993). In 1933, when the Hollywood Motion Picture Code banned the performance of “sexual perversion or any inference of it,” male impersonation seemed to disappear, while female impersonation went underground as adult entertainment in night clubs, “queer joints,” and drag balls (Drorbaugh, 1993, p. 124; Berube, 1990, p. 73; 1998, p. 234). Besides the JBR, which continued to perform, many gender impersonators, according to Drorbaugh (1993, p. 124), feared the connection between homosexuality and gender impersonation. Hamilton also argues that the decline in this “wholesome” gender impersonation based on “illusion” resulted from the general changes in middle-class ideology, particularly the belief that women and men were “mentally, emotionally, and psychologically different” creatures; thus, these shows were losing their “capacity to move audiences to ‘wonderment’” (1993, p. 118). Although not the primary cause, the decline in the popularity of drag, particularly the male impersonator, also coincides with the strengthening of medical research’s pathologization of “deviance” and attempts by researchers at “picking out the ‘bad seeds’ of the sex-gender system, such as the invert and the virago of the women’s movement” (Drorbaugh, 1993, p. 126).

*Drag*, in its contemporary sense, has been a part of gay subcultures at least as early as the 1940s (Green, 2010, p. 1742) and, by the 1960s, drag in the form of female impersonation (drag queens) was a well-established genre of performance (Newton, 1979a). In most contexts, drag is usually associated with men dressing up as women. The Oxford English Dictionary describes drag as slang for “feminine attire worn by a man; also, a party or dance attended by men wearing feminine attire” (*OED Online*, drag, n.d.). But when looking in slang dictionaries, we find that drag is defined most often in connection with the gender *and* sexuality of the person: “female dress as worn by homosexual males” and “male dress as worn by lesbians”

(Green, p. 1737). We see the term “drag queen” appear in print as early as 1941,<sup>17</sup> according to the OED, which defines this word as slang for male homosexual transvestites (*OED*, drag queen, n.d.). Other etymological sources show this term appearing in 1949 and provide more nuanced meanings and meanings specific to the subculture, such as “an effeminate homosexual who prefers to dress as a woman; sometimes as a professional female impersonator” (Green, 2014, p. 1742). We can conceptualize the term “drag queen” as a compound form of “drag” combined with the slang term for a male homosexual, a “queen.”<sup>18</sup>

We can find slang uses of “king” to refer to a “(gay) masculine lesbian” as early as 1965 (Green, 2010, p. 1223), and the term “drag butch” in 1972, referring to a woman/lesbian who dresses as a man (Newton, 1979a; Green, 2010, p. 1738). The earliest I’ve found reference to “drag king” is from 1972 in *The queen’s vernacular: a gay lexicon* describing the word as “woman masquerading as a man” (Rodgers, 1972). Del LaGrace Volcano, a photographer and drag king, recalls seeing the “first drag king shows for lesbians at the Baybrick Inn” in San Francisco in 1985 (1999, p. 10). But most references to “drag king” don’t seem to appear until the 1990s, when this genre of performance emerged in full force (Best, 1996; Green, 2010, p. 1738; Halberstam, 1997, 1998; Robin, 1998; Shiller, 1996; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Waters & Dick, 1997). In 1995, The *Toronto Star* reports that “Toronto’s first major drag king show took place last summer at the El Convento Rico, a Latino gay bar in the west end. It drew 650 people, three times more than expected”

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<sup>17</sup> Found in G. Legman, G. W. Henry, *Sex Variants* II. 1164: “*Drag-queen* a professional female impersonator; the term being transferentially used of a male homosexual who frequently . . . wears women’s clothing . . . while many innate male homosexuals wear women’s underwear . . . they are not for that reason called *drag-queens*” (OED, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* (2010, p. 404) cites 1949 as the earliest reference to *queen*, indicating male homosexual enthusiasts. Queen has innumerable compounds to denote homosexuals specializing in any activity (e.g., alley queen, queen mother, leather queen, etc.).

(DeMara, 1995). However, as Halberstam (1998) argues, “the truth is that as long as we have known the phrase ‘drag queen,’ the drag king has been a concept waiting to happen” (p. 233). Esther Newton, in a 1997 interview with Jack Halberstam, recalls a “drag king” competition in the late 1960s in Chicago:

As one segment of a drag queen context I witnessed . . . there was a ‘drag king’ competition (and although I wrote earlier that this term was never used then, I seem to remember that in this one context, on stage, it was), and I do have slides of it. I agree that the concept was always available, but, as Sarah Murray has noted, it never developed into a continuously generating tradition the way drag queen has. (Halberstam, 1998, p. 301)

And although Halberstam (1997; in Volcano & Halberstam, 1999) originally claims the discontinuity between male impersonators and drag kings (they write later in *Queer voices and musical genders* about the many famous African American and Black women (mostly blues singers) who continued to don male attire on stage during these eras, such as Stormé DeLarverie, Ma Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Willie Mae, “Big Mama” Thornton, and Bessie Smith (Halberstam, 2013; Braziel, 2005). Halberstam (2013) argues that male impersonation and drag king cultures (in lesbian subcultures) were actually prevalent in women of colour communities, particularly in Harlem. For example, they note, “According to Bruce Nugent, George Chauncey, Eric Marcus, and others, drag balls were pervasive in Chicago and New York in the 1930s and these African American balls included male and female impersonators” (2013, p. 184). These competing ideas lead us to conclude that there were likely divergent trajectories of male impersonation and drag kinging depending on location and cultural and racial contexts.

In a broader sense, drag refers to clothing that signifies a social role (Newton, 1979a, p. 3). In addition to clothing or style, drag often includes mannerisms, speech, and movement. Newton (1979) describes that “the concept of drag is embodied in a complex homosexual attitude toward social roles” (p. 3). Most drag focuses on attitudes around the social roles of gender and sexuality; more specifically, drag is usually an expression of a particular gender other than the gender of the person who wears the drag. However, drag clothing can signify any social role (e.g., firefighter suit, scientist lab coat, business suit) and can often simultaneously blend signifiers of gender, sexuality, class, and/or race. Muñoz (1999) writes, for example, that “drag’s elasticity extends to depict various subjectivities that traverse not only gender identification, but also

national, class, and geographic identity coordinates” (p. 135). We can see examples of this blending in some of the performances of Carmelita Tropicana (Pingalito in *Milk of Amnesia*) as well as in the Harlem drag ball cultures where people “walk” (i.e., compete) in categories that often are judged on gender and social class *realness* (Muñoz, 1999; Livingston, 1990).<sup>19</sup> *Realness* generally means to represent a particular look or act very well. Some example categories from Harlem ball culture include: town and country, executive realness, black and white pilgrims, futuristic American Indians, high fashion ski wear, butch queen, and high fashion European runway model effect from a foreign country.<sup>20</sup> In certain categories, realness refers to passing in the straight world. For example, the expression “serving butch queen realness” refers to a participant’s ability to blend in with male heterosexuals. We also see the blending of gender, race, and class in many drag king acts, something that I’ll discuss in more depth in subsequent sections specifically on drag kings.

### **What is a Drag Queen? What is Drag Queening?**

Drag queens are usually gay men (but not always) who perform femininity, sometimes professionally.<sup>21</sup> Drag queens are sometimes called female impersonators (particularly 1950s and 1960s queens), but this term, because it suggests a desire to pass as a woman, is not always appropriate. In early drag

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<sup>19</sup> Inspired by the New York ball scene, Calgary has recently started developing voguing and ball culture. I’ve attended two of their three consecutive annual balls. For more, see The Bad Girls Club YYC at <http://www.thebadgirlsclubbyyc.com/>

<sup>20</sup> For more, see [http://gayharlem.wikischolars.columbia.edu/Trans\\*Harlem+%28Ball+Culture%29#Ball+Culture:-Vernacular](http://gayharlem.wikischolars.columbia.edu/Trans*Harlem+%28Ball+Culture%29#Ball+Culture:-Vernacular)

<sup>21</sup> For examples of famous drag queens, see: RuPaul, Divine, Alaska Thunderfuck 5000, and Vaginal Davis. For examples of local Albertan drag kings, see: Teen Jesus Barbie, Darrin Hagen, and Twiggy.

queen cultural contexts, Newton notes, “the terms ‘female impersonator’ and ‘drag queen’ are sometimes distinguished to make invidious comparisons. Only professionals are called the former, while any homosexual in drag (including impersonators) can be called the latter” (1979a, p. 11). Most often queens perform some sort of hyperfemininity: a performance that intentionally and consistently embraces and expresses femininity past the point that most straight women do. Drag queens do a number of different types of performances including lip-synch, dancing, stand-up comedy, performance art fusions, singing, and fashion modeling. But there are all kinds of drag queens: pageant queens, glamour queens, high-fashion queens, terrorist drag queens,<sup>22</sup> impersonation queens, campy queens, and so on. Although the roots of queen culture may have begun (and continue to persist) primarily in gay bars and gay cultural events (e.g., Pride parades), queens and drag queen humour (camp) have undoubtedly infiltrated mainstream popular culture, particularly in film.<sup>23</sup> One of the most infamous queens, RuPaul, even has his own drag queen reality TV show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.<sup>24</sup>

Although men have been dressing up as women since Greek classical theatre, the rise of the drag queen

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<sup>22</sup> “Terrorist drag” often mixes performance art, punk rock, and racial or other social issues with drag. Sometimes called postmodern drag, terrorist drag is less mainstream. Muñoz calls it a “queerer modality of performance” when referring to Vaginal Creme Davis’s terrorist drag (1999, p. 97).

<sup>23</sup> For an example of drag filmography (mostly drag queen) from 1914–1995, see: Chermayeff, C., David, J., & Richardson, N. (1995). *Drag Diaries*. New York: Umbra Editions and Jonathan David (pp. 122–125). For other examples of queens in film, see: <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls057512964/>.

<sup>24</sup> Now in its 10<sup>th</sup> season, this show has put drag queens and their subculture in mainstream spotlights, even though it airs on a queer lifestyle channel (Logo TV). Most seasons are available on iTunes and one season is now available on Netflix.

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a specific subcultural phenomenon. To the best of my knowledge, Esther Newton's germinal ethnography, *Mother camp: female impersonators in America* (1979a), is one of the first scholarly works to document drag queen culture in North America. In it, she suggests that the development of this highly-segregated and highly-specialized form of performance "may be a recent phenomenon, caused perhaps by the advent of mass media (from which female impersonators have been virtually excluded) and the growth of the homosexual community" (Newton, 1979a, p. 5). Smith, in "Frock tactics," argues that gay men "reclaimed drag from the theatrical closet," most notably during the 1950s, particularly from all-male military drag revues (1994, p. 237). But simultaneously, the drag show lost most of the mainstream appeal that it previously had as it came to be reclaimed by gay men. Part of this decline we can also attribute to the fact that "as the homosexual became an increasing visible spectre during this decade—the Kinsey Report had been published in 1948, the Wolfenden Report came out in 1957—all those queens camping it up no longer seemed quite so much like wholesome family entertainment" (Smith, 1994, p. 237). Most drag queens and their culture seemed to go underground, and as the gay scene grew significantly over the next few decades, drag queens cultivated themselves as a staple of queer culture.

During the early days of drag queens and for many still today, drag queens represent the stereotype of homosexuals, or in other words, the stigma of effeminacy. "Professional drag queens," Newton (1979a) contends, are "therefore professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world" (p. 3). Even though some drag queens can become lionized in some subcultural contexts, she places the drag queen on the bottom rung of the social ladder within gay subcultural contexts. In the past, some gays and lesbians have criticized drag queens, claiming that they exhibit a negative and/or harmful image of gay people, and as a result they impede gay people's societal acceptance. This view is less common today, although drag queens are sometimes still criticized for misogyny and transphobia; for example, when their banter devalues the female body (particularly when they engage in misogynist joking about the smells associated with vaginas) or expresses disdain for "tranny drag," or queens who aren't real boys underneath.

Importantly, Newton (1979a) identifies two different patterns or ways of being a female impersonator:

street impersonators and stage impersonators. Although we can rarely situate people into neatly drawn categories, the two distinctions offer insight into the performance genre as well as different, often competing, styles of living in gay social worlds. Street impersonators are mostly younger performers (under 30) who tend to do “record acts” (i.e., lip-synch) and dancing. This pattern is a “fusion of the ‘street fairy’ life” which Newton (1979a) describes as “collective, illegal, and immediate (present oriented). Its central experiences are confrontation, prostitution, and drug ‘highs’” (p. 8). Often, unemployed young gay men who are highly alienated street fairies are very *nellie* in appearance (effeminate) and are always performing, even when they are not on the stage. They “publicly epitomize the homosexual stereotype” (p. 8). Stage impersonators, however, are usually over 30 and tend to do live work, which carries more prestige as both visual and verbal impersonation are required talents. Interestingly, at the time of Newton’s research (late 1960s and early 1970s) stage impersonators attempted to limit their impersonation to the stage in order to separate themselves from the stigmas associated with the practice. They refer to their performance more as a profession rather than just a job, as street fairies do. Not surprisingly, stage performers generally look down on street impersonators/street fairies by referring to them, for example, as “tacky street fairies.” A street fairy might respond in kind with something like, “Who does that phony bitch think *she* is? She’s as queer as the rest of us!” (p. 8).

### **Queens and camp.**

Drag queening, as a performance genre (or as a progressive verb), almost always employs elements of camp (i.e., homosexual humour and taste). Newton (1979b) contends, and I’m inclined to agree, that camp, along with drag, are the “most representative and widely used symbols of homosexuality in the English-speaking world” (p. 122). However, camp is itself very difficult to define and there are many competing characterizations of this form of humour. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to cover the

extensive literature on camp,<sup>25</sup> I'd like to outline a few important characterizations. Dyer describes camp as “profoundly denaturalizing because it implies an ironic stance towards official mainstream images or representations” (as cited in Escudero-Alfías, 2011, p. 260). Relying primarily on humour, camp is a performance style often used as cultural critique; it's usually fun but sharp-tongued. To this end, it can be a kind of self-defence or self-protection in the form of self-mockery or by attacking flaws in others. Newton (1979a) identifies three strong themes that make a particular thing or event campy: incongruity (subject matter), theatricality (style), and humour (strategy) (p. 106). The drag queen, for example, “creates the camp” by “pointing out the incongruity or by devising it” (Newton, 1979a, p. 106).<sup>26</sup> Newton says:

Camp is for fun; the aim of camp is to make an audience laugh. In fact, it is a system of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms. I saw the reverse transformation—from laughter to pathos—often enough, and it is axiomatic among the impersonators that when the camp cannot laugh, he dissolves into a maudlin bundle of self-pity. (1979a, p. 109)

Camp is also often ambiguous, and its reception largely depends on a person's feelings and perspectives around men, women, and sex. It's full of double-entendres and sexual innuendos. It can be available for straight audiences, but because camp plays off particular gay subcultural slang and ways of life, straight audiences may not always get the joke. Camp is invariably an expression of wit and humour, even when the subject is tragic or violent: “it is clear to me now how camp undercuts rage and therefore rebellion by ridiculing serious and concentrated bitterness” (Newton, 1979a, p. 109). Indeed, camp is not about seriousness— “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious” (Sontag, 1964/1999, p. 62). However, “one can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (Sontag, 1964/1999, p. 62). Camp is all

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<sup>25</sup> For other academic work on camp, see Bergman (1993); Meyer (1994); or Cleto (1999).

<sup>26</sup> For a recent example of camp, see Sharon Needles and Alaska Thunderfuck's hilarious YouTube series, *Pure camp*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tpGoRPXfXo>

exaggeration and passion. Susan Sontag accurately describes, “The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (1964/1999, p. 59).

Dyer characterizes camp as a distinctively gay male style,<sup>27</sup> language, and culture, which, in contrast to the masses of heteronormative signs, offers a “tremendous sense of identification and belonging” (as cited in Escudero-Alías, 2011, p. 110). Camp can be very in-your-fucking-face. As such, camp can also be exclusive in that it’s not the only way to be gay, and not all gay men are able to camp about. Camp, in its overabundance of fun and self-protection, can also prevent us from taking anything seriously—something that can overlook the misogyny that camp can reproduce. Of course, there are also sweet and compassionate queens, and despite accusations of vanity and narcissism, drag queens actually do an enormous amount of charity and activist work. For example, one of the oldest and longest lgbttq+ organizations in North America, the Imperial Court System,<sup>28</sup> hosts drag shows and events throughout the year to raise thousands of dollars for

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<sup>27</sup> The idea that camp is a “distinctly gay male style” is highly debated (and not one that I agree with). This debate will be discussed further in the section on kinging and camp.

<sup>28</sup> The Imperial Court System was founded by José Sarria (“The Widow Empress Norton”) in San Francisco, California in the 1960s. Sarria originally performed drag shows as fundraisers to post bail for gay men who had been arrested (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 122–123). In 1965, Sarria “established what is now known as the ‘Court System,’ and began giving out regal titles to those closest to her – such as ‘Grand Duchess’, ‘Grand Duke’, ‘Crown Prince’ and ‘Princess’, ‘Baron’ and ‘Baroness’” (pp. 122–123). After Sarria, Courts began to appear in other major cities in the United States and then in Canada. The Imperial Court System, now a very large international lgbttq+ organization, is a network of organizations that raises monies for charitable causes through regular drag performance events. Each chapter of the Court System is a separate, non-profit organization, and each year chapters hold regular drag events as well as annual Gala Coronation Balls, which are usually the largest event of the year; at these Balls, they bestow titles upon members such as “Crown

charities. The Pride Centre of Edmonton is a local example, which actually relies on the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose as one of its major sources of funding (MW, 2016).

### **Trans-antagonism in drag queen culture.**

The theatrical roots of drag in the late 1800s and early 1900s undoubtedly maintained rigid boundaries around gender and sexuality. Most gender impersonators during this time, whether or not they had same-sex or transgender desires, denied such associations with the practice of drag. And although early drag in 1950s and 1960s gay subculture became increasingly political, the divisions between men and women (gender binary) were still quite rigid (Newton, 1979a), as transgender and transsexual identities in gay subcultures were often stigmatized. And despite some of the shared history of persecution, early drag queen culture was still quite antagonistic to people who transgressed gender boundaries outside of the stage (Newton, 1979a). Although some popular definitions of drag queens represent them as analogous to transvestites, Newton (1979a) contends that “female impersonators” during the 1960s didn’t consider themselves transvestites, whom they viewed as “freakish.” To them, “the transvestite is one who dresses as a woman for some ‘perverted’ sexual purpose outside the context of performance (either informal, as in the gay bar, or formal,

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Prince or Princess,” who then have organizing responsibilities for the year and receive some level of prestige and honour within the Court subculture. At Court shows, drag queens typically run the show. They also have what they call drag kings, who are also called male performers; these performers are usually gay men who lip-sync on stage as men (but usually not in an overly performative way). Occasionally, Courts will feature drag kings in the sense of performers who engage in costuming and camp (which are the kinds of kings I focus on in this dissertation). In Edmonton, Alberta, the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose was established in 1975 (<http://www.iscwr.ca/>; Bonnett, 2006, p. 124). For more on the Imperial Court System, see <http://www.impcourt.org/>.

i.e., professional)” (p. 51). During the early drag days, before hormones became more widely used, “transy drag” referred to looking too much like a real woman (i.e., not enough exaggeration or show business style); it could also mean that the person was wearing an item of dress or accessory which wasn’t necessary for performance or which was worn in everyday life (p. 51).

Opportunities for hormone use and sex-change operations, however, challenged pervasive ideas on masculine-feminine dichotomy and resulted in contentious debates within gay and lesbian subcultures. Interestingly, Newton (1979a) notes that a significant proportion of female impersonators (especially street impersonators) had used or were using hormone shots or plastic breast inserts (p. 102). These practices were “strongly deplored by the stage impersonators” who believed that the female impersonation profession hinged on maleness. Further demonstrating the transphobia and antagonism within early drag and gay culture, stage impersonators claimed that these “hormone queens” were “placing themselves out of the homosexual subculture, since, by definition, a homosexual man wants to sleep with other men (Newton, 1979a, p. 102). To some extent, trans-antagonism and transphobia have lessened in drag communities and in broader gay and lesbian communities. But I think we’d be remiss to not think critically about how some of these beliefs and practices might continue to be reproduced, particularly in relation to perceptions of professionalism as well as class differences. Contemporarily, there remains contentious debate between drag queens and some transsexual and transgender people/communities who criticize, for example, the use of words such as “shemale” and “tranny” in drag queen culture.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For example, see the controversy over these words in RuPaul’s Drag Race:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/ruPaul-tranny/;](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/ruPaul-tranny/)

[http://www.salon.com/2014/05/27/ruPauls\\_aggressive\\_tirade\\_in\\_defense\\_of\\_the\\_term\\_tranny/;](http://www.salon.com/2014/05/27/ruPauls_aggressive_tirade_in_defense_of_the_term_tranny/)

<http://dragaholic.com/2014/08/laverne-cox-addresses-the-ruPaul-tranny-controversy/>

## What is a Drag King? What is Drag Kinging?

Halberstam (1998; Volcano and Halberstam, 1999) traces the origin of the drag king movement to the early 1990s and similar to other scholars, they define the drag king as “a female (usually) who performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity the mainstay of her act” (1998, p. 232). Although most drag kings are assigned female at birth, I prefer Del LaGrace Volcano’s definition, as it more accurately captures the diversity of gender and sexual subject positions of contemporary kinging: “Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity” (Volcano and Halberstam, 1999, p. 16). The term drag king refers to what someone is when they perform (the being); I also use the term drag kinging as a progressive verb, referring to the doing of this performance genre.<sup>30</sup> People often think drag kings are simply the opposite of drag queens. However, unlike drag queens, who have a longer (and somewhat different) history and who have become part of contemporary pop culture, the history and culture of drag kinging is much less familiar to those outside of the practice. Kings and queens do share some significant subcultural history, including state persecution, and at times they may share a desire to critique heteronormativity; however, the two genres have different relationships to embodiment, camp, the performativity of gender, feminism, and the history of misogyny and violence against women (Rupp, Taylor, & Shapiro, 2010; Halberstam, 1998; Newton, 1979a; Patterson, 2002; Escudero-Alías, 2009).

In tracing the development of drag kinging, for example, we are also necessarily tracing “a steady assault on the naturalness of male masculinity” and the development of public displays of “signs and symbols

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<sup>30</sup> Halberstam uses the term “drag kinging” to refer to humour associated with masculinity. They do this to differentiate from the camp humour of femininity and to avoid conflating drag and camp with butch-femme. Although this term may or may not be used by drag kings themselves, Halberstam contends that “a new term is the only way to avoid collapsing lesbian history and social practice with drag into gay male histories and practices” (1998, p. 238).

of an eroticized and often (but not inevitably) politicized female masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 233). When looking at dress, the historical struggle between men and women as to who “wears the breeches” demonstrates one such public symbol of contested masculinity and power (Senelick, 2000, p. 162). As Senelick (2000) contends, “‘To wear the breeches’ was well established in European languages by the sixteenth century as a metaphor for dominance” (p. 162). Although medieval *fabliaux* and vignettes portray women as champions in their frequent depictions of husband and wife squabbling over breeches, the fact remains that it was illegal for women to wear breeches in public until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Senelick, 2000; Cunningham, 2003). As such, the mere act of wearing trousers represented a political turn of events for women at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one imbued with undeniable symbolic power.

Within the drag king historical trajectory in Western European and North American contexts, it’s also important to remember the first appearance of male impersonation because prior to this genre, women could only play boys on the stage (i.e., not men), while men could perform all ages of both genders.<sup>31</sup> On the surface, the boy tradition seems to suggest that masculinity was in fact accessible to women prior to the 1860s. However, as Halberstam (1998) points out, this only reinforced the inaccessibility of the role of “authentic masculinity” for anyone without an adult male body, while virtually all other genders were/are theatrically accessible to men (p. 233). The appearance of the male impersonator signaled a shift on this front; however, drag kings have been unable to sustain the tradition in the way that female impersonators have,

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<sup>31</sup> This historical trajectory is particular to Western European and North American contexts. In other cultural geographies, women were seen on stage much earlier.

which we can attribute in part to the difficulty of dislodging mainstream ideas of masculinity as non-performative and as a male-only domain.<sup>32</sup>

One still might expect to find some seeds of drag king culture in the lesbian butch-femme bar cultures, particularly performances by butches, of the 1940s and onward. However, in *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam contends that most scholarship in this area seems to agree that no extensive drag king culture (or camp aesthetic among butches) existed between the 1930s male impersonators and the drag kings of the 1990s (1998, p. 234; Kennedy & Davis, 1993, p. 75). In *Mother Camp*, Newton notes that

There are also women who perform as men: male impersonators ('drag butches'). They are a recognized part of the profession, but there are very few of them. I saw only one male impersonator perform during the field work, but heard of several others. The relative scarcity of male impersonation presents important theoretical problems. (1979a, p. 5)

But as noted earlier, Newton later recalls an actual drag king contest in the 1960s within gay male queen culture. Research on African American drag ball culture and famous female blues singers also reveals that male impersonation did thrive post-1930s, at least in African American and Latino communities in New York and Chicago. Nonetheless, in comparison to the more clearly-defined lineage and popularity of female impersonation and drag queen culture, male impersonation and drag kinging are much less developed. There are a number of reasons these differences might exist. In addition to dress reform and the relative difficulty in dislodging connections between masculinity and maleness, it's important to point out the need for the butch (or the drag butch or the bulldagger) to pass as male as a matter of survival in certain contexts. Because butches often needed to pass, for example, "camp has been a luxury that the passing butch cannot afford" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 234). Many scholars have in fact criticized the conflation of gay and lesbian histories

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<sup>32</sup> Likewise, we might also ask how we view popular ideas about femininity and whether or not those are more easily dislodged than those of masculinity, and if so, why?

precisely because of the supposed absence of camp or drag aesthetic in lesbian subculture (Halberstam, 1998, p. 234; Kennedy and Davis, 1993). Lastly, we might also consider how radical separatist sections of the feminist movement cultivated anti-male environments during the late 1960s through the 1980s. During these times, safe spaces for drag kings and drag butches were hard to come by, even within some lesbian communities (Escudero-Alías, 2009, pp. 62–63). As Lauren Hasten argues:

Radical feminism fostered the spread of an anti-male attitude among women, especially lesbians, who until rather recently had little desire to engage in masculinity in any form. Masculine women were ridiculed within feminist ranks for imitating men, while lesbian couples with a butch-femme aesthetic were chastised for aping heterosexuality and perpetuating patriarchy. There was simply no friendly space for a Drag King. (1999, p. 9)

We can, however, find precursors to drag kings among some of the lesbian performance artists, actors, and theorists at the WOW Café Theatre in New York, a small but very culturally significant grassroots lesbian women’s theatre collective, which began in the early 1980s (Escudero-Alías, 2009; Noble, 2006; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999, p. 64; Davy, 2010).<sup>33</sup> Working mostly in the contexts of community theatre and photography, artists such as Pamela Camhe, Jordy Mark, and Split Britches (Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver) donned male drag during the 1980s in ways that were antithetical to some of the mainstream feminist anti-male sentiments (Davy, 2010, p. 68). In tracing three different waves of drag kings in Toronto, Noble (2006) acknowledges some of the overlap between the lesbian performances of WOW Café (and the theory written about these performances by Jill Dolan, Kate Davy, and Sue-Ellen Case) and the first wave of drag king performance in Toronto (p. 53). He says that the Greater Toronto Drag King Society in particular,

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<sup>33</sup> Performances at WOW Café were about lesbian representation and creating lesbian worlds. They weren’t about male impersonation. There were actually very rarely male characters in their performances, so while we may consider this culture part of the drag king trajectory, these performances were not drag king performances.

begin to mark the rupturing of lesbian discourse, theory, and identity by what I call the butch-femme renaissance. The first wave of kings in Toronto begins to expand the circles around 'lesbian' to map an imbrication with the then emerging queer theory and nation. (2006, p. 53)

In the following sub-sections, I first describe those who do drag kinging by locating the practice primarily in lesbian communities. Here, I outline the development of scholarly work on drag kings from the 1990s until the present, highlighting foundational drag king scholars, artists, and activists. I then explain how we can understand drag kinging as a genre of performance, and I give readers more information on what drag kings actually do and how they do it. Finally, I narrow my review to focus on the relationships amongst drag kinging and gender identity/expression, including discussions of identity transformation, masculinity, and shifting gender subjectivities.

### **Who does kinging?**

Contemporary drag kings are not simply women dressed up as men. Further, contrary to early 1990s mainstream coverage of drag kings as “supermodels in moustaches,”<sup>34</sup> real drag kings often provoke cultural anxiety in mainstream spaces. Volcano and Halberstam (1999) argue, for example, that people “fear that the costume may never come off,” or that males in particular may fear “being replaced or usurped” (p. 120). Although these fears may still exist, some recent media coverage of drag kings in the U.K. provides the public with a more accurate depiction of drag king scenes. Williams (2013), in her article in *The Independent*, acknowledges the draw of androgyny in the fashion world where female models have been increasingly modeling menswear, but she also makes clear distinctions between these performances of masculinity and those of drag kings. As she explains, drag kings have their own scene rooted in lesbian communities, and she

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<sup>34</sup> One of the goals of *The drag king book* was to counter these kinds of images found in magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Marie Claire* (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999).

grounds her article in conversations with drag king Lenna Cumberbatch, who runs the King of the Castle Competition in Newcastle (Williams, 2013).

While most people who perform as drag kings are assigned female at birth, they may or may not identify as female off stage. Many drag kings identify as androgynous, butch, genderqueer, or transgender. On the rare occasion, I've heard of kings who were assigned male at birth and transitioned to female and kings who are cisgender men. Sex and gender identification can vary by location, too. As Volcano and Halberstam (1999) note, for instance, drag kings in London identified almost exclusively as butch or transgender, while most of the New York kings identified as androgynous. Highly influenced by feminism, many kings identify with a wide variety of gender/sex identifications and sometimes pay more attention to the deconstruction of sex than drag queens. For example, "rather than focusing on an imbalance between a 'real' and 'fictitious' gender, most drag kings underline the constructedness of their gender identity" (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 69). Today, many drag king scenes reflect the increasing complexity with which people articulate their gendered and sexual subject positions. For example, the annual International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKE), which ran for 14 years (1999–2012), brought together drag kings, femmes, gender-benders, transgender performers, burlesque dancers, and other gender artists. Volcano and Halberstam (1999) do a great job of articulating the messiness of drag king subjectivities and politics in the following passage:

If mainstream media has often been thwarted in its hopeful anticipation that Drag Kings are properly feminine women dressing up for a lark; similarly, our search for what we considered provocative butchness and essential queerness beneath the costumes was also constantly thwarted. Drag King performances are neither essentially rebellious and inherently transgressive, nor are they simply a harmless attempt to dress up the feminine in new garb. Some Drag Kings confront us with the limits of gender, others confirm the intransigent nature of categories that we would like to wish away. Some Drag Kings are performers looking to make a buck, others are the heralds of queer future. Above all, they are contradictory, confusing—and intentionally so. (p. 41)

### **Scholarly work on drag kings.**

Until the 1990s, drag kings, while occasionally mentioned alongside drag queens, were largely overshadowed by queens in queer and feminist scholarship. In the late 1990s, although drag kinging had emerged, work on women doing drag appeared mostly in journalistic mediums (Troka, Noble, & LeBesco,

2002, p. 4). After the mini-explosion of the practice of drag kinging in Canada, the U.K., and the U.S., a ripple effect occurred with a similar explosion of scholarly work on drag kings in various mediums including film, live performance, scholarly articles, photography, and books. Jack Halberstam officially put drag kings on the scholarly map with their book, *Female masculinity* (1998) and their collaborative work, *The drag king book* (1999), with photographer, Del LaGrace Volcano. Halberstam has written extensively on drag king culture from both theoretical and ethnographic perspectives, locating most of their research in San Francisco, London, and New York (1997, 1998, 2001; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999). In addition to documenting some of the early 1990s drag king scenes and popular performers such as milDRÉD, the artist formally known as DRÉD, Mo B. Dick, Shelly Mars, and Murray Hill, they often include analysis on race in drag king performance and the relationships among popular culture, butch, female masculinity, and transgender in drag king scenes.

However, it wasn't until 1999 at the first IDKE in Columbus, Ohio, that performers and scholars from North America and England came together to dialogue about the larger drag king phenomenon that had emerged well-beyond what Troka, Noble, & LeBesco (2002) call "the holy triad of San Francisco, New York, and London" (p. 4). At that first IDKE, people came together and discussed who drag kings were, what they did, and why and how they did it. By looking at drag kinging practices from all over North America, some argue that during this time, "the landscape of drag king performance began to expand from its heretofore narrow confinement" (Troka, Noble, & LeBesco, 2002, p. 4). As a continuation and development of this initial gathering, Donna Troka, Bobby Noble, and Kathleen LeBesco (2002) edited the book, *The drag king anthology*, to provide a collection of works detailing the development of drag king troupes and communities in cities such as Montreal, Spokane, Washington, D.C., Columbus, Edmonton, Minneapolis, and Toronto. Simultaneously published in the *Journal of Homosexuality*,<sup>35</sup> this anthology is, in part, a critical

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<sup>35</sup> *Journal of Homosexuality* (2002), Volume 43, Numbers 3/4.

response to Halberstam's (2002) work including the editors' aims "to showcase the amazing growth and development of drag king troupes and communities outside the well-known happening scenes of New York, London, and San Francisco," and to provide analysis and experiences from the perspective of fans and performers (p. 1).

This anthology, like much of scholarly work on drag kinging outside of Halberstam's work, is predominately autobiographical and auto-ethnographic (but not without theoretical frameworks). In other words, although not all drag kings are academics, most scholars who write about drag kinging have done drag kinging (Escudero-Alías, 2009). While drag kinging began in lesbian and gay club cultures, "its current incarnation has its antecedents in academia" (Rosenfeld, 2002, p. 209). As Rosenfeld (2002) suggests, in discussing the graduate students who founded H.I.S. Kings, that "scholarly interest in drag as an exemplar of certain forms of gender theory has in turn led young academics to pursue an active praxis of drag" (p. 209). Besides the tremendous motivations around desire, power, and sex appeal that play a role for many wishing to take the stage as a drag king, we could imagine a number of reasons why this pattern emerges. For instance, as queer studies began to peak during the 1990s, many scholars became enthralled by the intimate connections between drag kinging and feminist and queer scholarship and the subversive potential of kinging in terms of challenging normative gender binaries. Embedded here I believe are also strong desires by such scholars to connect theory to practice, and what better way to do it than by getting on a stage in front of your community? Highly influenced by Judith Butler's *Gender trouble* and the performativity of gender, many early drag king scholars/performers sought to deconstruct the perceived naturalness of masculinity and instead reveal its performativity; that is, drag doesn't parody an original because there is no original. Drag is a parody "of the very notion of an original" (Butler, 1990, p. 138). As such, performers can also contribute to the construction of masculinity. Queer auto-ethnographic performance can therefore function as a way of reclaiming, and this reclaiming harkens back to culturally-shared memories of both the persecution of fags and cross-dressers as well as experiences of sexism and transphobia. As Muñoz (1999) says, queer auto-ethnography is

an effort to reclaim the past and put it in direct relationship with the present. Auto-ethnography is not interested in searching for some lost and essential experience, because it understands the relationship that subjects have with their own pasts as complicated yet necessary fictions. (pp. 82–83)

The photographer and activist, Del LaGrace Volcano, another foundational drag king pioneer, also engages in this type of auto-ethnographic work in addition to photographing drag kings and other gender variant masculinities of the late 1990s in San Francisco, London, and New York (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999).<sup>36</sup> Visual representations play a powerful role in the shaping and sedimentation of new meanings; Volcano's photographic work captures and makes possible the cultural production of new forms of masculinity. As Escudero-Álias (2009) reminds us, representations of marginal bodies blossomed post-1960s in the visual arts, and those representations became essential for (re)imagining the body (p. 58). Volcano's portfolio of photographs of drag kings builds on these traditions by challenging the existing aesthetic norms. Importantly, Volcano locates his work in relation to his own gendered desires and identity transformation—two things that are, of course, not mutually exclusive. His journey from dyke to drag king to pansexual trannyboy was intimately connected to his art. He says:

I've always been boycrazy but somehow it's taken me twenty years to realize what my desire for boys, boydykes, butchdykes and basically all forms of gender variant masculinities is about. I was photographing not only that which I found utterly sublime, or worthy of emulation. I was attempting, through art, through photography, to incorporate that which I wanted to be/come. . . . The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was the realization that what I was looking for in the people I photographed was a quality that was already within my grasp, a quality that I already possessed and that I now embody. Sometimes this quality is called 'masculinity.' I'm persistently looking for another, more precise term, but it will have to do for now. (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999, p. 13)

In the wake of the drag king boom, scholars have continued to put out work on drag kings in a variety of disciplines including education, performance studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Escudero-Álias's (2009) book, *Long live the king: a genealogy of performative gender*, is not grounded in ethnographic research

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<sup>36</sup> For more, see Del LaGrace Volcano's website: <http://www.dellagracevolcano.com/index.html>

or auto-ethnographic experience, but it provides some of the most comprehensive coverage of drag king scholarship to date. Escudero-Alías, in noting that most analyses of drag kings “have been embodied by insiders within the drag king phenomenon,” claims to provide a counterexample by offering an analysis with “critical distance” as an “outsider,” both to the culture of drag kinging and with a critical perspective outside an Anglo-American context (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 1). Her text provides a comprehensive and novel read on the connections between drag kinging and queer and feminist theory. And although her analysis on how drag kinging can both subvert and reinforce hegemonic masculinity is not particularly new, she does offer some significant analysis of audience reception in determining the effect of drag king strategies such as parody and camp (i.e., “meaning-transfer”). As part of this text, Escudero-Alías traces the trajectory of drag kinging scenes from the 1990s in New York, London, and San Francisco to the second wave drag kings of the early 2000’s in places like Columbus, Washington D. C., and San Diego. She also discusses drag kings on film and mainstream TV. Although these scenes and these popular drag kings have received a fair amount of focus in drag king scholarship, in many ways *Long live the king* brings everything together in one resource, complete with insightful and diverse theoretical analysis.

### **Drag kinging as a genre.**

Understanding drag kinging as a performance genre allows us to understand some of its history and politics, as well as some of the production/reception aspects of kinging. The characteristics defining a genre (in literary traditions) have been debated for centuries, though most genre theory stems from Aristotelian foundations (Makaryk, 1993, p. 70). At this point, however, asking what is a genre is as big a question as asking “what is art?” Extreme postmodern takes on genre, such as those put forth by Benedetto Croce, reject the use of any generic categories and instead posit that every work is its own genre (Makaryk, 1999, p. 81). However, in the context of drag kinging, genre still has significance and relevance because here it so clearly impacts not only the production of drag kinging, but also on reception and understanding. Genre, for example, is intimately related to cultural contexts. Makaryk (1999) explains: “As changes occur in the ways that societies perceive and understand the world around them, corresponding changes take place in the genres

employed by writers: literary kinds are connected with ‘*kinds* of knowledge and experience’” (p. 80). We can understand genres as our responses to cultural discourses (or cultural performances), an idea that is useful for analyzing how drag kinging uniquely combines art, activism, and academia through its relationships to feminism, queer theory, and gay and lesbian subculture.

Being familiar with the language and tropes of drag kinging necessarily underscores what audiences can take away from performances and whether they recognize parody and camp or even a performer’s attempts to experiment with drag kinging’s own conventions. As Newton astutely points out:

There is no communication between performer and audience without shared meanings. In fact the distinguishing characteristic of drag, as opposed to heterosexual transvestism, is its group character; all drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience. (1979a, p. 37)

Every act of reading or viewing can be read in different ways by different kinds of people; there is no single or inherent meaning in a cultural act (Hall, 1980). On stage, meanings are made through processes of negotiation between audience and performer (or viewer and text), which necessitates familiarity with particular kinds of signifiers and semiotic codes (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 70). To read drag king acts is, of course, hugely dependent on the way these acts are performed, and on a variety of other factors including location, design elements, set-up of audience, etc. However, drag audiences and performers typically share gender/sexual identities and social locations, which has important implications for reading drag meanings. For example, in order to read drag king acts as parodies of hegemonic types of masculinity rather than simply reiterations of those types, audiences need some kind of familiarity with gender codes and a “penchant for subversive pleasure” (Escudero-Alías, 2009; Bradford, 2002, p. 28). The complicit nature of drag king audiences, however, also calls into question how well we can evaluate the success in gender-bending and gender subversion of king performances (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 71). I take up this specific tension in my analysis in Chapter Five.

The art of kinging, like queening, involves transformation and often engagement with pop culture. Like drag queens, kings have all kinds of tricks of the trade. Typically, they sport some style of facial hair,

whether exaggerated or “realistic,” by adhering crepe hair or their own hair—sometimes pubic—to their face with spirit gum, hairspray, or barrier spray. Some kings also fill in their eyebrows with hair or makeup and shade/contour their brow and jaw line to give a more masculine appearance. Breast-binding is also common, for those of us who have them. To bind breasts, kings use tensor bandages, binders, and duct tape; sometimes really small-breasted people can get away with a tight sports bra. Some creative kings, like Spikey Van Dykey, wield a bare chest look by duct-taping their breasts to the side and drawing superhero designs across the chest, complete with defined abdominal muscles and glued-on nipples. Masculine hairstyles are also key to kining; the pompadour is particularly popular. And just as drag queens have their pop cultural icons and impersonation inspirations like Tina Turner, Cher, and Madonna, kings have their Elvis, James Dean, Shaft, George Michael, and David Bowie. Some kings also love to work with gay male sex culture, sporting looks like the “Castro clone” and other leather-clad daddy-boi figures (Volcano and Halberstam, 1999). And like their drag queen sisters, drag kings often play up or parody the image of the star. As Noble argues, king performances “parody both the contradictions of masculinity on stage, and the productive technologies of the star” (Noble, 2002, p. 251). Of course, embedded in these parodies might also be a king’s own desires for stardom.

While drag kings don’t always fit into neat little categories, there are definitely tropes they play with, particularly specific gender subjectivities from which drag kings locate themselves. Although Halberstam (1998) has been critiqued on this front, their taxonomy of drag kings at the Hershe Bar drag king contests in their book, *Female Masculinity*, provides some useful information on some of the types of drag king acts. Based on their observations of these contests in 1995–1996 in New York, they map out five gendered variations: butch realness, femme pretender, male mimicry, fag drag, and denaturalized masculinity. Butch realness refers to those performances by women who pass easily as men and/or who embody a recognizable female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998). Very often, winners of these Hershe Bar contests are those who display butch realness. This kind of masculine performance is actually more of a non-performance in that it requires very little costuming or theatricality. Butches simply get up on stage and serve it. They may or may not need

to don facial hair to accomplish this. With such reliance on the “real,” boundaries between butch and transgender also become blurred in this category. Halberstam (1998) also notes that in these particular contests, non-white contestants, who did not actually identify as drag kings, typically engaged in butch realness. One reason, they suggest, for the “relative invisibility of white female masculinity may also have to do with a history of the cultivation of an aesthetic of androgyny by white middle-class lesbians” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 248). There may also be other historical connections, as Halberstam (2007) claims that white male impersonators were known to be more androgynous than black male impersonators of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Opposing butch realness are the “femme pretenders.” Closer to drag queen performances, these kings employ irony and camp, and their juxtaposition between biological sex and gender is clear (p. 248). Femme pretenders might exaggerate their makeup or facial hair and often reveal some “female”<sup>37</sup> body part as part of their show, often in the form of striptease or parody of a striptease. “Male mimicry” is another drag king gender variation which “takes on a clearly identifiable form of male masculinity and attempts to reproduce it, sometimes with an ironic twist” (p. 250). Halberstam argues that this type of performance can be performed by butches or femmes,<sup>38</sup> but is more often part of femme pretender pieces. What sets this type of performance apart from butch realness is that it usually attempts to (re)produce masculinity rooted in maleness.

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<sup>37</sup> I put “female” in quotes here to signal practices of adjusting gender-normative language (shaped by biological determinism). Although it might be appropriate in this context if the “femme pretender” identifies as female, for the most part I try to refrain from using language that supports the idea that certain body parts constitute a person’s gender identity. For example, Spade suggests using phrases such as “people with breasts or ovaries” or “people who menstruate” (when applicable) rather than “female-bodied.” For more, see Dean Spade (2011).

<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, they don’t provide other subject positions for this style of performance, only butches or femmes.

Another drag king type, “fag drag,” presents an alternative (or minority) gay male masculinity. This kind of masculinity is quite theatrically available for drag kings; these performances might come in the form of gay leather culture or the “Castro clone” (p. 253). Lastly, Halberstam describes what they call “denaturalized masculinity” as a category that “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” (p. 253). This kind of performance mimics male masculinity (from a masculine subject position) while simultaneously parodying it; in this way, the drag king attempts to expose such things as sexism, misogyny, and male performativity (p. 255).

Although Halberstam notes that these categories are more common to the contest and not necessarily to regular performances, I believe they still provide some good examples of the modes of performance within the drag king genre as they relate to gendered and racial subjectivities, parody, realness, and camp. For example, during my experiences at two drag king contests in Edmonton and Calgary, I’ve also observed that judges and crowds really like butches. I’ve also seen a few examples of fag drag that can also allow kings to be sissy boys/bois and express a more queer or gay male femininity, something that I find particularly interesting and inspiring for my own drag. Outside of Halberstam’s work, Diane Torr’s famous Drag King Workshop, in which participants become “a man for a day,” provides another example of exercises in male mimicry without parody.<sup>39</sup>

We also see the blending of race in many drag king acts. In fact, Halberstam (1998) also states that “clear differences between majority and minority masculinities make the drag king act different for different women [sic]” (p. 235). Halberstam contends that white straight masculinity is available for parody by finding

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<sup>39</sup> For more, see: <http://dianetorr.com/workshops/man-for-a-day-workshop/> or Torr and Bottoms (2010).

ways to exaggerate its performative construction (i.e., not natural), but as Halberstam notes, because minority masculinities such as masculinities of colour and gay masculinities have been marked as visible and theatrical, they are more theatrically available in drag kinging (p. 235). Sometimes this manifests as white kings appropriating masculinities of colour in uncritical ways and for their own theatrical purposes. However, Halberstam suggests that kings who perform black and queer masculinities often do so “in the spirit of homage or tribute rather than humor” (p. 235). Halberstam (1998) argues that many black drag king performances rely on imitation and appropriation rather than parody (p. 257).

Braziel (2005) claims that Halberstam’s conclusions on race in drag kinging are largely descriptive rather than theoretical, and rely on troubling assumptions, such as that race is non-performative (p. 167). For example,

Figuring dominant masculinity as apparently nonperformative and minority masculinities as readily available for performance and performative appropriation obscures the all-too-necessary distinction between minority masculinity and stereotype, a distinction that Halberstam fails to note: what after all, is being performed—black masculinity proper (whatever that might be, and it is certainly not one thing) or stereotypes about black masculinity? (Braziel, 2005, p. 167)

Braziel claims that it is the latter that is performed, even though “black masculinity proper” has been obfuscated by the ways in which black masculinity has been predominantly represented as stereotype (2005, p. 167). On this point, Braziel argues that within Halberstam’s analysis of Dréd’s performances, “masculinity is seen as the performative or performed element, not blackness itself. Race, for Halberstam, seems to remain irreducible difference” (2005, p. 168). In troubling some of these assumptions, Braziel (2005) and Escudero-Alías (2011) are able to show how some black drag king performances, such as those by Dréd, involve homage *and* parody. Contrary to previous analyses, Braziel (2005) asserts that both homage and parody are key to Dréd’s performances. Dréd pays tribute while also

satirizing the consuming gaze of dominant white audiences that create, sustain, manipulate, exploit, recycle, and even appropriate the stereotypical and racist images of black masculinities. Parody is a key element in Dréd’s kinging of black masculinities, but one must be clear on the object of that performative parody: it is not black men whom Dréd satirizes or parodies; it is the horrific stereotypes about black masculinities and the racist cultures invested in creating and perpetuating those pejorative tropes. (Braziel, 2005, p. 168)

### **Kinging and camp.**

Many scholars have theorized camp as a resistance strategy predominately for gay males, and since the publication of Newton's germinal ethnography on female impersonators, gay and lesbian scholars have been debating the relationships among camp, drag, embodiment, and gay culture (Cleto, 1999; Davy, 1993; Dyer, 1999; Halberstam, 1998, p. 231; Muñoz, 1999; Newton, 1979a, 1996). The use of camp by lesbian or female subjects, although garnering considerably less attention, has been hotly debated among lesbian feminist scholars (Halberstam, 1998, p. 237). As I alluded to in earlier sections, central to such debates is the conflation of drag, camp, and butch-femme styles. Sue-Ellen Case, in her famous 1989 essay, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in looking at butch-femme relations on stage and in working class lesbian bar cultures, argues that camp is discursively produced by both gay men and lesbians, originating from what it's like to live in the closet. Case takes a rather general stance around camp in that she seems to extend it as a strategy for other marginal groups as well: "The power of camp ironizing and distancing the regime of realist terror mounted by heterosexist forces has become useful as a discourse and style for other marginal factions" (p. 61). Kate Davy (1993), however, in her analysis of performances by WOW Café and Theatre of the Ridiculous (TOR),<sup>40</sup> strongly disagrees with camp's ability to serve lesbians in the same way that it serves gay males and suggests that it can even be quite dangerous for lesbians. Although WOW performances, like TOR, rely on irony and double-entendre—two staples of camp—she says that the butch-femme culture in WOW performances is not about cross-dressing, and that the "butch of butch femme gender play is engaged in lesbian representation, and not male impersonation" (Davy, 1993, p. 113). She says further that men's camp

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<sup>40</sup> Theatre of the Ridiculous can be understood as synonymous with camp and involves men impersonating women "in narratives peopled for the most part by heterosexual characters" (Davy, 1993 p. 112).

tends to “re-inscribe, rather than undermine, the dominant culture paradigms it appropriates for its parody” (Davy, 1993, p. 117). Ultimately, Davy (1993) contends, “butch-femme artifice is so much more a part of lesbian discourse than Camp discourse” in that it resists assimilation into the predominant arena of male subject positions and male sexuality (p. 123).

On this point, Muñoz (1999) contends, “Davy and other critics do not recognize the ability of lesbian camp to imagine new realities” (p. 133). For example, we can imagine (or observe first-hand) at least one way, within drag contexts, that camp becomes available for lesbians or female subjects: when butches dress as drag queens. Newton analyzes such observations in a drag contest in Cherry Grove (1996, pp. 165–166). Escudero-Alías also argues that most drag king acts do in fact employ some kind of camp aesthetic (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 68). Halberstam, however, points out 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 outrageous performances of masculinity” (1998, p. 237). Drag king performances, as they are concerned primarily with masculinity, usually take on different types of humour and performance techniques. Halberstam further contends that campy drag king performances are those that generally let some sort of femininity shine through to “inflect the masculinity” (1998, p. 238). While this theorization seems plausible, as I have discussed in earlier sections, camp isn’t *just* predicated on gender. These theorizations and rich history around camp and homosexuality (and drag) illustrate the many ways in which we can understand and explore the politics and aesthetics of drag kinging.

### **Drag kinging and gender identity/expression.**

With or without camp, drag king scholars have described how drag kinging offers safe spaces for critiquing dominant masculinities and expressing and celebrating relationships to and positive receptions of female masculinities, transmasculinities, and queer sexualities (Troka, Lebesco, & Noble, 2002; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Halberstam, 1998; Baur, 2002; Escudero-Alías, 2010; Shapiro, 2007; Noble, 2006; Patterson, 2002). This recognition is counter to what occurs in most other public and pop cultural spaces, both virtual and physical, where the bonds between masculinity and maleness are still hard to break

(Halberstam, 1998, 2001). When we consider the historical and contemporary regulation of gender and sexual norms, the value of these spaces for lesbian and queer communities then seems fairly obvious. On the value of the DC Kings, for example, Patterson remarks:

As scholars have noted of butches, the DC Kings have emotional and social investments in their characters, and spectators have emotional, visceral reactions to their performances. The DC drag kings have worked to create an atmosphere in which people receive female masculinities much more favorably than in any other public, social space I have ever encountered. (2002, p. 100)

Scholars have examined connections between drag king performance and politics, predominately asking the following questions: does drag kinging re-inscribe and/or challenge gender stereotypes, sexism, and the gender binary? And the answer is yes: it does and can do all of these things, sometimes simultaneously.

Although this work continues to be incredibly important, I am more interested in how drag affects peoples' relationships to masculinity, particularly within lesbian or queer communities that may or may not embody histories of separatism, racism, or trans-antagonism. What kinds of transformations or realizations about identity and privilege, if any, take place through drag performance?

What interests me, then, are the connections among drag kinging and transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming bodies, desires, and subjectivities (Koenig, 2002; Berbery & Johnson, 2017; Halberstam, 2005; Brittan, Mootoo, & Peers, 2009; Baur, 2002; Noble, 2006; Escudero-Alías, 2009) and the handful of work that interrogates the intersectionality among gender, masculinity, and race in drag kinging (Halberstam, 1997; Braziel, 2005; LeBesco, 2005; Brittan, Mootoo, & Peers, 2009). Importantly, some researchers demonstrate the complexity of defining a drag king in the contexts of lesbian investments in butch roles (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Halberstam 1998; Maltz, 1998; Koenig, 2002), particularly considering the instability of sex and the messy but beautiful slippage between butch and transgender identities and expressions. From these scholars, we can begin to imagine how the phenomenon of the drag king plays a role in the (re)production of subcultural identities, both within lesbian bar scenes and in academic

worlds now filled with queer, post-*Gender trouble* imaginings. Bobby Noble, in reflecting how a “pond scum”<sup>41</sup> drag king character can captivate a dyke bar, asks what kind of cultural work the drag king does. He responds:

My tentative answer is that when drag kinging emerged, it worked toward articulating an unspoken tension inherent in identity politics that continually asks what we are. Our political task must be not finding out what we are but understanding the relations between what we say we are and what we deny we are. I am not implying that female or trans masculinities are actually Mr. Pond Scum at their core. But I do want to suggest that the power of the drag kings lies in the exposure to the impurity of categorization itself, especially those categories that have historically understood themselves to be bound, distinct, somehow discrete, and separate (like, for instance, our history of lesbian separatism and, for some of us, the history of White supremacy). (Noble, 2006, pp. 70–71)

Within that research stream are also works that illustrate the role of drag kinging in identity transformation (Bradford, 2002; Rupp, Taylor, & Shapiro, 2010; Shapiro, 2007; Volcano in Volcano & Halberstam, 1999). Volcano, for example, writes that:

There are a small but significant percentage of Kings who acknowledge that their Drag King personas are more than a stage act. An even smaller percentage have passed through the Drag King scene and now identify as transgender, transsexual, intersexual, or simply gender variant. For some of us, what started out as a performance or an experiment, became the reality of choice. Being a King for me was part of the process I call ‘intentional mutation.’ (1999, p. 27)

In a qualitative study in 2007 of the drag king troupe the Disposable Boy Toys (DBT) of Santa Barbara, Shapiro found that 25 members of the group identified exclusively as female when they joined the DBT, but only 16 did so during interviews (p. 257). They came to call themselves genderqueer, female-to-male (FTM), and transgender. She suggests that such identity transformations took place through four collective mechanisms: imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support. The author also notes that non-white members were not equally affected by drag in relation to

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<sup>41</sup> “Pond scum” is a slang term for the worst kind of person. In this context, it’s referring to a particular kind of man that is likely sexist, misogynist, and oppressive, and generally treats women as inferior and/or as objects. He may also likely be racist, homophobic, and transphobic, among other things.

gender identity transformation (p. 261); these differences also pose important theoretical questions around race in drag kinging and identity transformation.

Others have critiqued drag kinging/ drag kings as less authentic forms of masculinity and/or as trivializations of real-life issues faced by gender-nonconformists (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Maltz, 1998). In her 1998 article, for example, Maltz investigates queer female masculinities within four sites: theatrical male impersonation performances of the 1940s – 1960s, contemporary U.S. drag kings, the act of passing as male, and stone butch<sup>42</sup> subjectivity. Arguing that drag kings don't have real relationships to masculinity but only parody maleness, she characterizes the NY Club Casanova drag king scene as trendy, hipster, white, non-erotic, and obsessed with the performativity of gender rather than realness. Her main critique seems to hinge on the fact that we should not frame drag kings under butch subjectivity because they neither try to pass as male nor do they try to be perceived as stone butch. Although Maltz offers a perspective I value, I think her investigations into drag kinging and male impersonation are rather cursory and oversimplified and lack genuine engagement with drag kings themselves. Her arguments seem to consistently refer to stone butches as occupying some kind of stable identity category—realness—but she also consistently refers to them as occupying contradictory categories (i.e., their investments in queer femaleness and simultaneous resistance to the categories woman and lesbian).

These explorations and critiques of the connections and tensions among drag kinging and transgender, butch, and genderqueer provoke further inquiry into the relationships between drag kinging and identity transformation and shifting gender subjectivities. As Feinberg (p. 1998) argues, “Trans expression has

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<sup>42</sup> “Stone butch” is a butch lesbian who exclusively plays the role of a “top” in sexual relationships and typically prefers not to be penetrated during sex (or to not have their genitalia be touched). Stone butches instead usually derive their pleasure from pleasing their sexual partners.

shaped theater, and in turn theater—including modern vaudeville, burlesque, and Broadway—has left its imprint on many drag cultures. It has given those of us who walk through the world feeling despised the freedom to perform before cheering, appreciative audiences” (p. 25). The tensions between drag performance and everyday passing have always been a part of drag culture, tensions that continue to evolve and morph over time. Building on king research that looks at the overlap between theatre and life off-stage, my research explores the role of kinging in the lives of Albertan kings; in doing so, I investigate how kings negotiate the complexity of performing masculinities while simultaneously constructing their own multi-layered gendered subjectivities and developing their own queer politics.

## Chapter Two — Methodology

### Introduction

Methodologically, this is an interdisciplinary ethnographic project about drag kings and drag king performance. This study builds on the scholarly traditions of performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003; Conrad, 2008; Madison, 2005; Conquergood, 1982b, 1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1998; Schechner, 1973, 1985, 1998; Turner, 1982a, 1982b, 1985) and auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones & Adams, 2010; Madison, 2005; Muñoz, 1999). Both performance ethnography and auto-ethnography can be conceptualized as arts-based research (ABR) approaches (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Leavy, 2009; Madison, 2005; McNiff, 2008). Investigating the role of performance in the everyday lives of drag kings (including mine) within a specific socio-cultural context calls for a qualitative methodological approach that situates the primacy of performance in research and values the connection between the personal and the social. Performance ethnography and auto-ethnography fit this project well because they provided guidelines, frameworks, and examples for combining ethnographic methods with performance theories and concepts, particularly the interconnectedness of culture, self, and performance (Conrad, 2008).

My primary research sites included:

1. Nineteen one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with drag kings in Alberta, including myself (for the latter, I had a participant interview me); and
2. my drag performance work.

Secondarily, I also interviewed the former director of the Pride Centre in Edmonton and long-time Edmonton gay rights activist and politician, Michael Phair, for their perspectives on trans issues and socio-political context in Alberta, respectively. In addition to attending live shows in Edmonton and Calgary, I also co-founded the Edmonton drag troupe, Queer Royale, and was involved with organizing and performing at drag and queer performance events from 2012 to 2016 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and Cleveland, Ohio, USA. The outcomes, or products, of this ethnographic research combine several types of writing/artistic genres including historical/archival documentation, creative non-fiction, live performance, photography, and

theoretical analysis.

In the following sections of this chapter, I first give an overview of ABR and then a description of performance ethnography and auto-ethnography. For each, I explain how my work builds on these two traditions. Following this, I detail the specific practices and processes for this research including research sites, interviews and interviewing processes, reflections on positionality, and representations of the research.

### **Arts-Based Research**

As a relatively new methodology, Arts-Based Research (ABR) emerged as a research genre in the 1990s after several decades of change within academic research (Sinner et al., 2006; Leavy, 2009). For example, during these decades, social research experienced what is known as “the paradigm wars,” “the crisis of representation,” and “the performance turn” (Conquergood, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To better understand the context in which ABR emerged, I’d like to take a brief look at each of these major changes in social research. Pulling from Teddlie and Tashakkori’s work, Denzin and Lincoln outline at least three periods of paradigm conflicts in their 2008 book introduction, “The landscape of qualitative research” including the postpositivist-constructivist war against positivism (1970–1990); the conflict between competing postpositivist, constructivist, and critical theory paradigms (1990–2005); and the current conflict between evidence-based methodologists and the mixed methods, interpretive, and critical theory schools (2005–present) (p. 1). These conflicts demonstrate one way of understanding the contexts in which arts-based research methods began to emerge and receive greater legitimization as positivist and postpositivist paradigms gradually lost their hegemonic status within social inquiry. The “crisis of representation” occurred during the 1980s and marked a time when genres had begun to blur, and qualitative researchers had become *bricoleurs*, borrowing techniques and theories from different disciplines. Researchers began to struggle with “how to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts” (p. 3). Social scientists learned how to “produce texts that refused to be read in simplistic, linear, incontrovertible terms,” and the “line between a text and a context blurred” (p. 3). The “performance turn” occurred in the social sciences and humanities in the early 1990s

during a time that Denzin and Lincoln also call a period of experimental and new ethnographies (p. 3). During this time (1990–1995), researchers continued to distance themselves from foundational criteria and instead began outlining alternative criteria that “might prove evocative, moral, critical, and rooted in local understandings” (p. 3). I will be describing below how the shift toward performance emerged, in part, as a response to the domination of written texts in academia, as well as to the theoretical developments on the interconnectedness of culture and performance (Conquergood, 1982a, 1982b, 1986a, 1986b, 1998; Madison, 2005; Schechner, 1973, 1985, 1998; Turner, 1982a, 1982b, 1985).

Many qualitative researchers now recognize ABR as a legitimate form of doing research as well as a way of creating and representing knowledge (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Conrad, 2004; Leavy, 2009). As an extension of the qualitative paradigm, arts-based practices can be defined as a

set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (Leavy, 2009, pp. 2–3)

Rather than art simply being the object of research or the data, ABR also uses artistic practices as research and analysis and in presentation of research findings (e.g., artistic practice or performance as research; creative non-fiction; photos in presentation of findings). Arts-based researchers use artistic expression as a “primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies” (Caniff, 2008, p. 29). For example, researchers may use the artistic processes involved in arts such as visual arts, dance, theatre, literature, photography, or performance art. Although situated with the general paradigm of qualitative research, arts-based approaches can still challenge some qualitative conventions and ways of knowing (Leavy, 2009). ABR strays, for instance, from concerns such as validity and truth, which some postpositivist qualitative researchers still strive for.

## **Performance Ethnography**

Performance ethnography embraces the intimate and mutually constitutive relationships between performance, culture, and consciousness; this approach therefore provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of the drag king phenomena. Because my primary research question asks what role drag performance plays in the lives of drag kings, I've chosen a methodological approach that acknowledges the particular ways of knowing and experiencing born from theatrical performance, ways which are not always separate from everyday lives. Performance ethnography therefore fits my research well because it reaches beyond theatrical performances/creations for the stage to also encompass everyday performances that may happen alongside or as a result of the theatrical performances themselves (Conrad, 2004, 2008; Leavy, 2009). Under the umbrella of ABR, performance ethnography combines ethnographic methods with performance studies theories and concepts (Conrad, 2008). To better understand the stories and experiences of participants, I employ the performance theories of liminality (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1986, 1992) and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999), along with Bettcher's (2007) philosophical concepts of the natural attitude, identity enforcement, and the double bind. I describe each of these theoretical ideas in the last section of the methodology chapter.

Performance ethnography has roots in anthropology (Turner, 1982a, 1982b, 1985) and communication/performance studies (Conquergood, 1982b, 1986a, 1986b, 1998); both fields recognize performance as a legitimate and ethical way of representing ethnographic insights (Conrad, 2004). Performance ethnography is one methodological approach that emerged during the "crisis of representation" and the "performative turn" within qualitative research during the 1990s (Conquergood, 1982b; Conrad, 2008; Turner, 1974); this approach developed out of concurrent ideas in postmodern theorizing, embodiment research, and interdisciplinarity as well as new epistemological developments by qualitative researchers aimed at "access[ing] subjugated voices" as crucial to knowledge construction (Leavy, 2009, p. 137). Performance ethnography "offers an alternative performative way of knowing . . . drawing out responses that are

spontaneous, intuitive, tacit, experiential, embodied, and affective, rather than simply cognitive” (Courtney as cited in Conrad, 2008, p. 609).

The main theoretical foundations that inform performance ethnography come primarily from the work of anthropologists Victor Turner (1982a, 1982b, 1985), Richard Schechner (1973, 1985, 1998), and Dwight Conquergood (1982b, 1989, 1998). From this work, we can begin with the understanding that culture and performance are intimately interconnected and mutually constitutive, each playing a role in the other’s development and expression (Madison, 2005). We “simultaneously recognize, substantiate, and (re)create ourselves as well as Others through performance” (Madison, 2005, p. 150). Diane Conrad (2008) defines performance ethnography, in part, as “a collection of interrelated methods that can be employed at any or all stages of the research process—for generating or gathering research material, for interpreting or analyzing material, and for representing research” (p. 609). As I discuss in this chapter, my research takes up the “interrelated methods” of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and performance for gathering research material. For interpreting and analyzing this material, I employ performance theories and concepts (liminality, constituency audience, and disidentification), philosophical theories on gender (natural attitude, identity enforcement, performativity), as well as my own lived experience as a gendered person.

### **Auto-Ethnography**

My research projects begin, as Conrad (2003) suggests, with “the premise that research will always be affected by the subjectivity of the researcher, in the choice of research topic and in the interpretation of research findings” (p. 44). Auto-ethnography takes this premise a step further with explicit integration of the researcher into the research process. This methodological approach includes *auto*, or self, as well as *ethno*, or culture, but it becomes something greater than just the combination of these two pieces (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 130). Auto-ethnography often involves the “movement of personal histories into a public sphere” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 81), and can be loosely defined as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p.

739). As texts, auto-ethnography takes a variety of forms including short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 130). As performance, auto-ethnography can be practiced and presented via video work, plays, performance pieces, art installations, or other experimental forms (Leavy, 2009, p. 40). In this dissertation, my own experiences performing as a drag king, co-creating a drag king troupe, and organizing drag performance community events inform all stages of my research process. I used auto-ethnographic approaches to gather research material (co-created drag performances, autobiographical exploratory writing, author interview); to analyze research material (pulling from personal experiences to make comparisons); and to represent research findings (co-created drag performances, composite narrative drag journal, photography).

Like performance ethnography, auto-ethnographic approaches became more legitimate forms of research with the rise in challenges to positivist paradigms in social research by feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, multiculturalism, and cultural studies, as well as the rise in interdisciplinary research (Leavy, 2009, p. 38). Bochner writes that auto-ethnography is one of the avenues of research that emerged during the “crisis of representation” that challenged hegemonic protocols of theory generation and generalization, and instead promoted personal experience, emotion, and storytelling (as cited in Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p. 128). Also born from the continued developments/debates about the roles of researchers within ethnography, auto-ethnography pushes away from the logic of the objective, distanced, and neutral observer/researcher to an understanding that ethnographic texts are co-constructed representations of which researchers are a part (Leavy, 2009, p. 38). In contrast to the colonial roots of ethnography, auto-ethnography can also function as a queer and a postcolonial method (Jones & Adams, 2010; Muñoz, 1999). In fact, the history of auto-ethnography shows that the “contestation of history itself has been a catalyst of auto-ethnography as a methodology, revealing auto-ethnography’s potential to break and remake canons of history through localized subaltern knowledges” (Spry, 2011, p. 499). Not only does auto-ethnography problematize the insider-outsider dichotomy in social research, it can also challenge the “social and symbolic economy that regulates otherness” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 81).

Like any research project, doing auto-ethnographic work requires self-reflexive practices; in particular, we need to ask why we are including ourselves in our research and what makes questions about our own subjectivity legitimate or important to the research process. In our attempts to reflect on how our personal lives are structurally embedded within larger hegemonic cultural contexts, we must be wary of excessive self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement. The inclusion of our personal stories must have purpose and connection to the larger research goals. For example, in their auto-ethnographic work, Danielle Peers (2015) doesn't just share their stories, their "engage[s] the archive of [their] bodily experiences, practices, identities, and capacities in order to historicize and politicize the workings of inspiration in relation to disabled subjectivity." Using Peers (2015) as a model for auto-ethnographic work and drawing on the work of Rooke (2010), I asked an important question in my research: "Was I merely reflecting on others in order to talk about myself?" (p 38). My response is tentative, but I believe that the experiences I share in this work go beyond just me. Performative auto-ethnography intentionally connects the personal and the political and should extend beyond the mere articulation of personal experience. As Spry (2011) argues,

it is the intentional and critically reflexive connection of this narrative to larger social issues, to the politics, pleasure, and pain of other people, that distinguishes performative ethnography as a methodology grounded in forging knowledge with others to dismantle and transform the inequities of power structures. (p. 498)

Not only do my experiences connect with those of the research participants in meaningful ways, but I also use my identities, experiences, and practices to connect to larger political issues of homophobia, transphobia, and sexism. As I discuss later, I use my auto-ethnographic work specifically to politicize the communicative function of gender and to explore what gender freedom might look like. Nonetheless, it's difficult to step back and assess my own work; to have a cold eye, for example, rather than a hot eye on myself. To facilitate some kind of external assessment, I wasn't able to include any formal talk-backs, which are usually understood as an exchange between the audience and the performers post-performance. Talk-backs with audiences may be used as a kind of validity check, and as Leavy (2009) notes, "Given that arts-based practices are often used as representational vehicles in social justice-oriented

studies, many researchers have a postperformance or postviewing *dialogue with the audience*’ (p. 18). However, many of my performances were also part of large-scale community organizing events, which required exceptional emotional commitment; as such, there was little time for additional inquiry such as formal talk-backs. Talk-backs came mostly in the form of debriefing and dialoguing among our drag king troupe post-performance. In other performances, the organizers didn’t integrate a talk-back portion for performers and audience to dialogue. All my performances, however, went through a feedback process with my drag king troupe, Queer Royale, in which my colleagues provided helpful feedback to help improve the piece. Additionally, for my final boilesque performance, all my PhD committee members were invited to attend the show as a form of external assessment. Leavy (2009) talks about this variation of “talk-backs with audiences” as a way to incorporate an “external review phase” or ‘external dialogue’ in which experts, colleagues, or interested subpopulations are invited to consume the data [sic] and offer their feedback” (p. 18).

## **Research Sites**

This study involved a variety of research sites including interviews (21), drag king performances, and the Gender, Movement, and Performance Workshop. Below, I detail each of these research sites and how they were used in this project.

### **Interviews.**

This research included interviews with drag kings (18), interviews with community members (2), and an interview with the researcher (1). In addition to interviewing drag kings, I interviewed two community members whose knowledge I thought would add helpful context to the project. I interviewed a former director of the Edmonton Pride Centre who has lived in Alberta for almost 40 years; I interviewed him to gain insight on Alberta queer culture and trans issues. I also interviewed Michael Phair to better understand the socio-political context in Alberta around lgbttq+ rights; Phair is a long-time gay rights activist in Edmonton who served on Edmonton city council from 1992 to 2007 and is now the Chair of the University of Alberta Board of Governors. I refer to these two community members as cultural elders throughout the

dissertation. I also included myself as an interviewee; one of the interviewees in this project (a friend and colleague in Queer Royale) interviewed me with the same interview guide that was used for other interviewees. Below, I outline some of the important aspects of interviewing in this research project.

### ***Recruiting participants.***

For this project, I was interested in interviewing people who had performed (or were still performing) as a drag king. As inclusion criteria for drag king interviews, I originally outlined the following criteria: that the participant has performed as a drag king in Alberta, and identifies as trans or genderqueer. However, as I began interviewing, I omitted the second inclusion criteria because I felt these gender categories were too restrictive and narrow. Even though most drag kings I interviewed were some iteration of non-binary, people who play with gender generally find labels constricting, and I still wanted to include cisgender perspectives and stories.

To recruit interviewees, I used a strategy commonly referred to as snowball sampling. I started with contacting drag kings whom I already knew from Queer Royale, the Alberta Beef, and the Fake Mustache. From these contacts, I then extended my recruitment to other members of the two latter troupes. Additionally, I used my community contacts to get in touch with several members of the Fly Bastards, who performed in the late 1990s in Edmonton. The recruitment of the older troupe was the most challenging as I had to first discover who they were, and once I was in contact, I didn't quite have the rapport or direct connection that I had with people in Queer Royale and the Alberta Beef. Moreover, most of the Fly Bastards no longer lived in Edmonton. Despite these challenges, I was able to interview three kings from this early troupe who turned out to offer unique and important perspectives for the overall project. As another recruitment strategy, I also tried online advertising on social media groups with drag troupes (e.g., the Fake Mustache and ISCWR), but found this strategy ineffective. I also tried using the manager of a troupe as an intermediary to get in touch with performers (i.e., the Fake Mustache troupe), which was also ineffective. To extend the representation of the Fake Mustache, I attended two of their monthly shows in Calgary to make

personal connections with performers and was able to add one additional interviewee using this strategy. My opinion is that without personal connection, recruitment often falls short.

### ***Interviewing process.***

All participants were given an information letter and consent form prior to the interview to sign (Appendices B and C). Audio of all 21 interviews was recorded either over the phone (5) or face-to-face (16). Face-to-face interviews took place at the interviewees' homes (8), the researcher's home (5), a coffee shop (1), a community centre (1), and the University library (1). Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and by hired transcribers who agreed to emailed confidentiality agreements prior to transcription. For all interviews, I used an interview guide to help keep the conversation focused on the research questions; over the course of the research, these guides evolved to improve the clarity of questions. After the first four or five interviews, for example, I revised the interview guide as some of the questions seemed too abstract (academic). I also reorganized the interview guide into subsections and tried to eliminate repetition that I had noticed with the first few interviews (Appendix D). Three interview guides were custom designed to reflect the specific knowledge area of the interviewee: one was designed for a drag king who had knowledge of the Imperial Sovereign Court system, and two were designed for community members who were not drag kings but who had knowledge of socio-political issues in Alberta. For the drag king who had performed with the Court, I extended questions about kinging to queening and added these two additional questions: Can you talk about your involvement with the Court (in Alberta or elsewhere), and what role do drag kings play in the Court? For the community member interview guides, see Appendices E and F.

Ideally, interviewing can be much like other forms of dialogue where there is an equal exchange of voices and power. Ann Oakley (1981) contended, and many other feminist researchers have since recognized, interviews are two-way conversations involving the give and take of information for both interviewer and interviewee; interviewees are not mere objects and/or data—they are people, and the interview has significance and meaning as a social interaction that extends beyond the confines of the research. Research insights, for example, are understood as co-constructions, and interviewing in this way arguably helps

participants play a more active role in articulating their stories. Respectful and ethical interviewers are also not afraid to divulge personal information. It's about giving a little rather than just taking a lot. However, this doesn't mean that interviewers should take the spotlight and dominate the entire conversation with their stories. Doing this would not only be rude and disrespectful, but it would also leave the researcher with little more than a personal memoir. Sharing information can be about sharing experience and validation of those experiences—it can be about sharing joy and humour in the things we love and fight for, while also sharing frustration and anger in the face of opposition. These exchanges build trust and rapport, which are arguably part of what it takes to gather rich insights in an honest and ethical way.

Although I strove for this ideal in my approach to interviewing, the reality is that semi-structured interviews can sometimes create a contrived and forced conversation with particular aims and expectations. As a researcher, there are topics I want to get at and questions I want answered, and these aims may not necessarily be what the interviewee intends to share. The list of questions, for example, predetermines the structure and content of the exchange. To mitigate these factors, I tried as much as possible to follow the interviewees' storytelling and follow up with questions relevant to what they were saying rather than simply moving on to the next question. For some interviewees, they had no problem taking control of the interview and talking with little prompting; they often answered questions without me having to ask them. With other more reticent interviewees, it was difficult to get into a natural flowing conversation, and following the interview guide as a fall-back structure meant the conversation was more a question-and-answer format.

### ***Interview participants.***

It is not my intention to draw conclusions and make comparisons based on socio-demographic information, but I do want to provide a brief description of some of these characteristics for the participants in this study. I did not screen the participants to facilitate diversity, although I did intentionally seek out trans perspectives. Interviewees were either asked in person or given a sheet to fill out asking simple questions about socio-demographics including gender, race/ethnicity, education, occupation/what you do for money, age, and children. These questions were asked to get a broader picture of the overall interview sample. For

some interviewees, this information wasn't obtained because participants didn't return the demographic sheet to me. The following are some of the socio-demographic characteristics either known by the researcher or gathered during the interview process.

In terms of education, most interviewees had some university/post-secondary: four achieved or were pursuing bachelor's degrees at the time of the interview; seven interviewees had a master's degree or higher; two people had education in the trades; and three had no formal education past high school. At least six interviewees mentioned having children, and at least eleven had no children. One participant identifies as neuro-atypical (i.e., Asperger's). Besides this participant, no one mentioned experiencing/having physical or mental disability beyond long-term or chronic injuries and pain. In terms of age, at the time of the interview, 11 interviewees were between the ages of 30 and 39; five were between the ages of 20 and 29; three were between 40 and 50; and two interviewees, the two cultural elders, were over 60 years of age. The sample includes a broad range of gender identities/expressions, but most of the interviewees identified as some iteration of non-binary (13), which includes transgender kings (3). Four interviewees, including kings and community members, were transgender, three were cisgender female, and three were cisgender male. In terms of race/ethnicity, the bulk of interviewees were some iteration of white (14); two were Indigenous (Cree/Métis); and two were mixed-race (Filipino; Jamaican/Scottish). In terms of employment and making money, there was quite a lot of diversity among the interviewees, from pipefitters and bricklayers to creative writers, servers, university professors, sex trade workers, and badass moms. I have provided tables to help render this information accessible to readers in a different format (Appendices G and H).

### ***Interview analysis.***

The interviews and analysis took place over two years from July 2015 to December 2017. Drag king interviews took place from July 2015 to May 2016; one community interview took place in May 2016, and the other took place in December 2017. Interview analysis for this project was a cyclical and iterative process alternating among interviewing, reflecting, performing, writing interview summaries, comparing within and

across interviews, transcribing, coding, identifying themes, mind-mapping, writing thematic summaries, and using theory and existing literature to understand and situate emerging themes.

Once an interview was completed, I sent the interview to a trusted colleague for transcription. When I received the transcripts, I checked for accuracy by reading through the transcription while listening to the audio recording of the interview. I then uploaded the transcription into a qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA. I used this program to store interview transcripts and other research materials (e.g., photos, newspaper clippings), and most importantly, to help me code the transcripts. To be clear, the software itself doesn't do the coding, but facilitates this process by allowing me to create codes (e.g., themes or identifiers) and memos (a running log of analytical thinking) attached to pieces of text in the transcripts. As often as I could, I used in-vivo codes, which are words that were actually spoken by interviewees. Importantly, the software also allows you to compile different combinations of codes and texts into an Excel or html file; for example, I could compile all the pieces of texts coded with "drag and trans experiences" across all interviews (or selected interviews) into a single document. Or I could compile all texts pieces with multiple specific codes such as "drag and trans experiences," "Queer Royale," and "gender identity/expression." This function allowed me to analyze the connections between codes/themes across interviews and to compile text into categories that I could use for analysis. I also printed all transcripts onto paper so that I could read them and make notes and codes by hand; this method allowed me to re-read the transcripts in a different medium and then revisit my coding of that interview in MAXQDA. Each transcript was read a minimum of three times, but many were read more than five times. As interviews were completed and coded, I worked to refine the codes, add new codes, or collapse codes that were the same.

I also used some creative practices in analysis such as mind-mapping and diagramming and putting two or more interviewees in an imaginary dialogue with one another. For the latter, for example, I put the three kings from the Fly Bastards in conversation with one another to create a documentation of that

particular troupe history and to understand some of the implicit tensions among the troupe members. The idea here in both cases is to use various creative ways to explore potential meanings and interpretations.

### **Drag king performances.**

In addition to interviews, this research also includes drag king performances, including my own performative work as well as performances by Queer Royale and the Alberta Beef (video and photography). Although I attended two Fake Mustache shows in Calgary, I didn't include these as research sites; attending those shows were for recruitment purposes. My drag performance work was used as a means to investigate research questions (practice as research) and to explore the overarching normative goals of this gender project.<sup>43</sup> More details on this performative research site are outlined in Interludes One and Two. Videoed performances and photographs of kings in Queer Royale and the Alberta Beef were analyzed and used as examples of drag king tropes, themes, and tensions; links, photos, and references to these performative sites can be found in Chapters Four, Five, and Six as well as Interludes One and Two.

### **Gender, movement, and performance workshop.**

The third research site – the Gender, Movement, and Performance Workshop – took place in Edmonton, Alberta, between January 2013 and April 2013. The workshop was created, organized, and facilitated by me and Laine Wannechko and was funded by a project/event grant from the Alberta Public Interest Research Group (APIRG) at the University of Alberta. For this workshop, we had seven two-hour meetings at the Arts-Based Research Studio at the University of Alberta (Edmonton), which culminated in two public group performances: The Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Conference in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Alberta and the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Alberta OUTreach drag show/competition. The workshop included 10 people who were interested in exploring gender, power,

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<sup>43</sup> The normative goals of this project will be outlined in the last section of this methodology chapter.

identity, oppression, race, ability, and experience through performance art, drag kinging, and/or other mediums of visual art and writing. Eight of these 10 went on to form the Queer Royale Drag Troupe. I used this research site in documenting the history of drag kinging in Edmonton in Chapter Four. The workshop was also as a site of analysis for reflecting on topics such as safer spaces, consent, and anti-oppression in drag king spaces.

### **Reflecting on Positionality and Other Ethical Considerations**

Attending to my own positionality within the research process has been hard work but it is “vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison, 2005, p. 7). Gauging my success at this practice I find even more challenging. What I offer here is not a complete documentation of how I did or didn’t do the right thing, but instead I offer some short reflections on some of my experiences and ethical considerations in this research project.

Because I have been socially and sometimes intimately connected to the subcultures and people involved in this study (queer, drag kings), I’ve had to carefully consider how my position as researcher, community organizer, activist, friend, lover, drag king performer, and mentor affected relationships that I was able to forge and the decisions I was able to make. In their study within queer subcultures, Rooke (2010) talks about the use of “cultural and social capital” in negotiating access to certain cultural niches (p 35). My social capital as a queer drag king, for example, gave me access to a community of drag kings that might not have been possible for someone else. Moreover, although my process for recruiting interviewees was non-coercive, some interviewees might still have felt a degree of personal obligation to participate in my study either because I was their friend, I was their friend’s spouse, or because I had mentored them in drag king workshops. Moreover, my intimate relationships and my potential intimate involvement with other queers in my community also affected my research choices and ethical considerations. For example, I’m married to one of the participants in this study, which made me privy to much more information about their life than was

revealed in their interview. Of course, I always sought their verbal consent before using this information; however, our relationship undoubtedly gave me access to knowledge not only about their life but also some of the history of drag kinging in Edmonton.

When reflecting on my position in the social matrix of power, privilege, and oppression, there are also a number of tensions that aren't easily resolved. On the one hand, I was able to connect with interviewees in many aspects of shared oppression as a gay/queer, non-binary, and assigned-female-at-birth person. On the other hand, I also occupy the position of a white and *highly educated*<sup>44</sup> researcher; I've tried to recognize this privilege throughout the research process, particularly during interviews. Although many interviewees were also white and held university degrees, this was not the case overall. In regard to race, I've tried to ask myself what it means, for example, to perform and maintain my own whiteness (Myer, 2008; Warren, 2003). To be honest, I'm still not completely sure. Perhaps that is the result of being white; I can't really see my own whiteness very well. While it's fairly easy for me to recognize the white privilege that I experience in everyday life because of systemic racism, it's more difficult for me to understand my white privilege in this particular research context. Reflecting now, however, something stands out: why didn't I include specific research questions about race and/or the intersections of race and gender in drag king experiences? Although my focus for this project wasn't about race, I do consider myself an intersectional feminist. Did I unconsciously avoid posing questions about race because I didn't want to field those conversations? We (Queer Royale) did have conversations about race in the Gender, Movement, and

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<sup>44</sup> I put this in italics to highlight the constructed nature of the term. Here, *highly educated* means educated in post-secondary educational settings to the master's or PhD level.

Performance Workshop and in our subsequent community organizing; we talked at length, for example, about cultural appropriation and the dangers of using marginal masculinities for theatrical purposes.

In regard to recognizing my power as a researcher, I made an explicit intention not to take on the expert role in an interview; as interviewers, we should use discretion by looking carefully at the impetus to speak (Alcoff, 1995) and the impetus not to speak (Scharff, 2010) in order to avoid further silencing oppressed groups and/or positioning oneself as an authority on a subject (such as gender, drag, or politics). Instead, I tried to approach interviews with curiosity about other people's experience and knowledge. I tend to think of active listening as one of my strengths, and in interviews, I often used strategies like restating, summarizing, effective pausing, reflecting on the significance of statements, and then responding. However, I did redirect conversations when I felt we were getting too far off topic or if we had sufficiently covered an important topic and needed to move on. As much as I strived toward the goal of being a curious listener rather than a drag expert, I found myself at least once taking on the role of educator with a younger king who was unaware of previous drag kinging in Alberta. While this exchange could be understood as one that might happen in everyday conversation, it's hard to say what the actual impact might have been on the interviewee who didn't ask for a history lesson.

Throughout these interviews, I also observed a few participants come to realizations about themselves and the role of drag in their lives; these observations demonstrated to me how interviews can initiate novel reflections that have real-life repercussions outside of the interview itself. As an example, I'd like to share a story from Dee, below, responding to the question, "Do you feel like drag is, or was important to you at one time? And if so, can you tell me a little bit about why?" As a listener (or reader), notice how the narrative unfolds, how the interviewee comes to a new understanding about his own memories as he tells a story about himself that he has presumably never told before:

Ok. Yeah, I mean it was important at the time. It was also something that was happening in a year between two degrees where I didn't have much else going on. So, it was important probably more than it would have been if I had been busy with school and stuff. But it was important because it was fun, because . . . any time you get up on the stage and people come to watch you, it's a nice little ego

boost. It was fun because of the adrenaline; it was fun because of also the ego boost or the attention post (show), as I said, which was also nice for affirming my gender identity.

I'm pretty sure, *actually thinking back on it* [emphasis added], that was pretty much the year where I .... Yeah, it was around that time, by the time I went back to school ... like I did a Psych degree first, and then I went and did an honours after-degree in English, and when I went back, I went back knowing that I would be focusing on gender in my research. *And, yeah, I think that was pretty much when I started . . . coming out as trans* [emphasis added]. At least, you know socially to pretty much everyone. At school, or going out and stuff like that. So how much drag had to .... *You know what it probably had quite a bit to do with it* [emphasis added].

You know, I just remember sticking spirit gum on my face and pasting on little bits of hair that I'd shaved off my head and feeling like when I looked in the mirror ... like, this feels right. So, in a way, it was a nice trial run. You know? It was a nice way of being able to figure out ... is this .... it was the first time I tried to .... *I kind of never thought of this... it was the first time I tried to pass* [emphasis added]. Right? And the first time I tried to 'dress as a man', instead of just being butch or being read as butch. And you know, strapping down . . . . *this is so long ago it's so weird to think of having had tits, it's so funny* [emphasis added]. But yeah, I remember binding and stuff, and looking at my side profile and going like, "oh yeah, that's awesome." *So yeah, actually I think it had quite a lot* [emphasis added]—it might have taken me quite a lot longer to get there if I hadn't had this sort of weird kick in the ass of having to, you know, get dressed up and play pretend. *So yeah, I think it had quite a lot to do with it* [emphasis added]. (2016)

Reading through Dee's story, we can witness the reflective process as he realizes, through the act of revisiting old memories, what role drag played specifically in his gender transition journey. While this realization may not have been life-changing for Dee per se, I believe this example captures one way in which we re-create our own narratives about ourselves and our experiences through the act of storytelling. It also demonstrates what can happen when a researcher asks for and actively listens to a person's story.

Margaret Wheatley (2001) also talks about listening as healing and what it means to be heard by someone who listens. Although the intentions of this project were not about therapy or healing, there is something to be said for telling your story for a captive audience who is willing to listen. I tried to keep this idea in mind when interviewees spoke about topics that might make them feel vulnerable, like personal experiences with mental health struggles, suicide, feelings of alienation, or experiences and fears of violence. In response, I chose to remain quiet at times. I would just listen. Other times, I might respond in an interested way or acknowledge the person's issues or feelings. Often, I would thank people for telling their stories regardless if they were talking about difficult issues. Although I think it's important to have a bit of

give-and-take in an interview, I tried hard to limit my own storytelling unless it was about a shared experience or if I was asked a direct question. I think this kind of discretion is important for researchers in deciding what stories we tell and when and why we're telling them. Even with perceived shared experiences, we should be wary of assuming that we know what they are saying, or that our experiences in this world are the same as the interviewee's (even if they may appear to be). There are delicate ways to connect with someone about experiences of sexism or homophobia while still acknowledging the uniqueness and importance of *their* experience and *their* story.

### **Representation of Findings**

This research project yielded massive amounts of research material. Deciding which themes were most important or which stories need to be told was perhaps one of the more challenging tasks. For this project, I relied on both the frequency of a theme mentioned, the perceived significance of a theme to the interviewee, and the significance and connection of a theme to the overall research questions. In thinking about what stories to tell, I also considered some fundamental aims of ABR approaches and some of the evaluative criteria for ABR. Leavy (2009), for example, talks about focusing on resonance, understanding, multiple meanings, dimensionality, and collaboration (pp. 15–16). I asked further how a theme might affect or resonate emotionally and intellectually with a given audience. Does the theme or story generate new questions? Does it move me to write/create? Does it move me to action?

Working with these considerations and from codes, summaries, and focused free-writes, I began to form drafts of potential chapters. There were dozens of iterations of these chapters. Most of these chapters pull from the research interviews as the main source of research material. Documenting the drag king legacy in Edmonton, Alberta (Chapter Four) involved compiling stories from all interviewees across three decades and organizing these stories chronologically by troupe. Creating Chapter Three required that I put participants' stories (drag kings and community members) in conversation with existing literature on gay and lesbian rights in Alberta to demonstrate some of the legal marginality experienced by interviewees. The

process of creating the Drag Journal (Appendix A) began with a 20-page draft of a composite character from 20 interviewees, including myself. In the first draft, I compiled memorable quotes from interview transcripts, combined them with some of my own narrative stories, and then organized them thematically. In the following two iterations of this piece, I worked on eliminating repetition and shaping the narrative into a singular voice; the fourth draft I worked toward shaping the text into a specific writing genre: a narrative journal. Interludes One and Two document my boilesque and drag performance through descriptive writing, video links, and photographs. In Chapters Five and Six, I put interviewees' stories and performances in conversation with performance and gender theories (Bettcher, 2007; Muñoz, 1999; Turner, 1969, 1982a) in order to analyze the complex role of drag kinging in the lives of these participants.

In the following section, I outline these theoretical frameworks that I take up in the analysis of the research findings.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Performing Gender in Liminal Spaces**

In this study, I engage queer, feminist, and performative frameworks to theorize why and how drag king performance functions as a space for personal transformation and political resistance (and conformity) in a distinctly anti-lgbtq+ socio-political context. I ask how drag kinging might re-imagine the communicative function of gender presentation and what the implications of this re-imagining may be. I employ the theorists Talia Mae Bettcher (2007), Victor Turner (1969, 1982a), and José Muñoz (1999) to help make sense of how and why drag king performance creates opportunities for individual agency, and why sexual and gender minorities seek and need such liminal spaces. The ultimate normative goal of this gender project looks for ways we can end gender oppression; however, as I discuss in Chapters Five and Six, this is always a contested project.

Bettcher (2007) and Feinberg (1998) help us understand the constraints on gender freedom and agency through their critiques of the current sex-gender system; both critiques illustrate how social norms concerning sexual dimorphism and gender/sex congruence reinforce and perpetuate violence against trans

and non-binary people. An important part of understanding this violence involves examining the extent to which we have the freedom to self-define our genders when gender itself is relationally and structurally constituted. Bettcher uses the term *natural attitude* to explain the social norms that ultimately rely on genitalia to establish and regulate sex and gender. We can think about the development of drag performance as intimately connected, ideologically and culturally, to the regulation of gender, sexual, and racial norms such as those found within the natural attitude. This is key to interpreting what drag kinging is all about. As I will discuss in my analysis, Bettcher's work offers a number of useful theoretical ideas (i.e., natural attitude, identify enforcement, communicative function of gender, double bind) that help demonstrate the social terrain that many non-binary and transpeople (people/kings) navigate on a daily basis and sets the stage for imagining alternative communicative functions of gender presentation.

Turner's theory of liminality and Muñoz theory of disidentification provide useful frameworks that help integrate Bettcher's ideas into drag king performative contexts: liminality articulates the conditions under which a disruption of the natural attitude might occur, while disidentification explains how drag kinging can function as an act of individual agency already entangled within dominant ideologies around hegemonic masculinity, assimilation, and resistance. Kings seek out liminal spaces in order to find something different, or outside of the natural attitude. Through play, costuming, experimentation, and community support, the liminal space of drag facilitates transformative experiences and allows participants to re-imagine their genders. However, drag can also function as a conformist intervention, and such re-imaginings often involve negotiating the tensions between accessing male power while also critiquing hegemonic masculinity. Disidentification, as one performative strategy, helps demonstrate how Albetan drag kings navigate and reflect on this complicated terrain as well as how they rework cultural codes through performative acts in ways that re-imagine their own identities and relationships to masculinity. Although not a common occurrence, there is also the potential for drag king performance to produce a liminoid effect, which occurs when the performed enters the realm of the real. Although liminoid is not a sufficiently developed concept

within performance theory,<sup>45</sup> the connections between play and liminality and between seriousness and liminoid are helpful dyads for thinking about those moments where drag kings move back and forth between campy parody and the complexity of accessing male power and enacting toxic masculinities.

In the following chapter, I outline the distinct socio-politically conservative environment in which Albertan kings live and perform.

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<sup>45</sup> Turner (1982a) originally coined the term liminoid but his analysis of this concept is underdeveloped.

### Chapter Three — Living on the Margins: Lgbttq+ Rights in Alberta, Canada, 1980s–2017

Most interviewees live their daily lives on the margins of cultural categories in relation to heteronormativity (e.g., norms of cisgender, heterosexuality), and some in relation to race (e.g., norms of white supremacy, racism, and colonialism). Drag appeals to people living “in between culturally identified gender categories” (Lil’ Mack) because, like other liminal spaces, it offers a playful escape away from normative cultural institutions and discourses (Turner, 1969, 1982a). While gender identities and expressions vary among interviewees (e.g., butch, boi, lesbian, man, woman, trans, etc.), 16 out of 19 performers exist in between at least the two normative gender categories (male and female), with only one of them identifying as heterosexual. Across all three decades, living in Alberta as a queer or non-binary person was portrayed as particularly tough, and participants described experiences of feeling unsafe or being harassed.

Within a heterosexual framework, which I would contend structures the majority of public spaces, gender expression for women, queers, trans, and non-binary people becomes a safety issue in a number of ways. First, presenting or reading as female within such a framework presents its own violence. Dee remarked that

Being read as a woman can feel unsafe, just in terms of it being a psychological assault on your identity, but it could also, even if you are a woman . . . the [cisgender] kind . . . just being female on the street. . . . can [have] a pretty continuous element of physical threat.

When asked if Colin Ize was concerned with passing in everyday life, they said “if I know that I’m going to be at the university late and it’s Friday or the weekend, I might dress or present more masculine that day just because I don’t feel like being harassed walking down Whyte Avenue.” Second, presenting or being read as gay/queer is directly tied to your gender presentation, including your dress, haircut, mannerisms, and who you are with and what kind of affection or intimacy you share with them in public. For example, Colin Ize described Fort McMurray as “kind of hostile” and “a little scary sometimes.” Similarly, Mac U. More talked about how “being dyke-called sucks”:

My ex makes stand up and she has this one skit where she talks about how femme girls get cat-called all the time, and how she gets dyke-called. She’ll be walking down Whyte Ave and they’ll scream “DYKE!” and she’ll make a big joke out of it, but it’s also scary. [Because you don’t know] what their

intentions are behind it. If they're just being dicks screaming something out the window or if they're going to actually fuckin' roll up at the next intersection, and say you're a dyke and a bunch of hateful shit, or if they're going to try to beat you up, because that happens. That's scary too.

One of the youngest kings, Oliver Heart, recalled their experiences of bullying in high school in Sherwood Park when they came out as gay.

It just went really, really, really, badly. You know, the bullying, the whole nine yards, the exclusion. The looks that you would get in the girls change room or even the comments from your team sometimes, and that's not the way it should be. I actually transferred high schools for my grade 12 year. Went into the city. Didn't tell anybody I was gay. Didn't tell anybody I was straight. Just completely avoided that topic in general; it went over a lot better when I got into the bigger city.

We also see evidence of this in Jack Strap's story about getting harassed while walking with their girlfriend on Whyte Ave in the late 1990s in Edmonton (not in drag).

Safety can also become an issue if you present as ambiguously gendered, whether intentional or not. Lil' Mack described, for example, experiences of stigma and silence when occupying a space in between the cultural categories of gender (butch and genderqueer). Colin Ize said that they face barriers if they try to pass in any kind of way "because it sort of seems like bargaining and giving up one part of my identity for my safety sort of thing sometimes, and I'm not completely cool with that, but I'd prefer not to get my ass kicked on Whyte Avenue." Al also sheds light on this kind of safety while in drag in public:

one time I experienced a pretty scary situation where someone who I was reading as a cis dude got super aggressive towards me and I wasn't sure if they were super aggressive either because they read me as not a "real man" or that they read me as a very effeminate and potentially gay man and were displeased with either option. But I wasn't sure which way they were interpreting my appearance and identity. Yeah, it was pretty scary, I was on public transportation late at night on the train and there weren't a lot of people around and I wasn't able to use my cell phone underground so it was actually pretty shaking.

As these stories illustrate, many interviewees, particularly in the 1990s, described their local Albertan environments as intolerant towards queers and gender-nonconforming people, even though there are now increasingly accepting queer enclaves within the city. A visible queer community was still quite small in the

1990s, as Jack Strap remarks that “we would be really lucky if 100 people showed up at a [Pride] parade.”<sup>46</sup> Muff E. Ohso, who now lives in a more progressive Eastern Canadian city, described Edmonton and Alberta growing up as “Oil, hockey, minus 40, violent; it was pretty redneck, it was pretty male aggressive, always.” Because of this kind of environment, James Dean, a queer trans guy from Lethbridge who currently lives in Calgary, says “to be queer here [in Alberta] in general you need to be more resilient.”

Participant perceptions and experiences of animosity, harassment, and social conservatism in Alberta directly reflect the political landscape in which they lived and the province’s history of intense policy battles over sexual minority rights which occurred most explicitly in the 1980s (i.e., bath house raids) and again in the mid-1990s to 2013 (e.g., Individual Rights Protection Act, Adult Interdependent Relations Act, gay marriage). During this time, the provincial Progressive Conservative (PC)<sup>47</sup> government consistently catered to socially conservative, evangelical Christian, and moral traditionalist views on sexuality and gender. At the same time, since the early 1990s, queer people living in Alberta have become “increasingly visible, increasingly vocal in demanding their realities and their identities be recognized in Alberta society” (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 328). André Grace and Kris Wells (2016), described Alberta as a province

where, historically, the forces of social and political conservatism have been relentless in targeting sexual and gender minorities. As social and cultural outsiders and castaways, we have perennially struggled to live with the torment and fragility that mark our existence in the intersection of the moral and the political. (p. 23)

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<sup>46</sup> The first pride in Edmonton was in 1980. Pride 2017 marked Edmonton’s 37th Pride.

<sup>47</sup> In July 2017, The United Conservative Party (UCP) was established as the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta and the Wildrose Party merged to form the official opposition in Alberta Canada. The Wildrose Party is more socially conservative, regionalist, populist, and libertarian-leaning, as well as less oriented to the political establishment, especially at the federal level.

Although party leaders have since ceded to losses on sexual diversity issues, they put up quite a battle. Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas (2012) contend that “on ‘smaller’ issues related to sexual diversity in particular there have been legislative moves on sexual diversity that set the province apart from other parts of Canada, sometimes coupled with extreme political rhetoric” (p. 25). For example, on a policy level, Alberta governments prior to 2015 fought sexual minority rights every step of the way, even if without openly embracing evangelical Christian views. Legal, political, and social discourses on homosexuality in Alberta, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s, depicted queers and gender non-conformists as morally depraved, youth-recruiting pedophiles not worthy of basic human rights (Filax, 2006). Moreover, legal discourse in Alberta has consistently framed heterosexuals as the norm even when these discourses have been opened up to include sexual minorities; such was the case, for example, with The Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and Bill C-23 (Filax, 2006, p. 103).<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Lloyd & Bonnett (2005) contend that Alberta’s legislative responses to Charter challenges essentially denied the existence and identities of gays and lesbians while simultaneously elevating the sanctity of heterosexuality (p. 328). As noted in Chapter One, these kinds of discourses follow centuries-long history in the North American legal system’s

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<sup>48</sup> “The Criminal Law Amendment Act privatized homosexual affection and sex, while heterosexual affection and some sexual activity retained its status as public sex” (Filax, 2006, p. 103). “Court interpretations of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms established sexual orientation as something that pertains to lesbians and gay men, while heterosexuals retained their status as the unnamed norm” (Filax, 2006, p. 103). “Bill C-23 made it possible for same-sex couples to take up many of the benefits previously afforded only to heterosexual couples, but it also protected marriage as the preserve of those who are ‘normal.’ In other words, it recognized same-sex relations only when they mirrored heterosexual partnerships. Those who identify with other sexual arrangements remain outside legal discourse” (Filax, 2006, p. 103).

treatment of sexual and gender minorities, which includes but is not limited to anti-cross-dressing, sodomy, and anti-gay statutes in American and Canadian contexts (Warner, 2002; Stryker, 2008; Eskridge & Hunter, 2004; Sutherland, 2000; Weeks, 1977; Jackson & Persky, 1982; Feinberg, 1996; Kimmel & Robinson, 2001).

The provincial government of Alberta consistently “resisted the inclusion of GLBT people into public sphere policy-formation” (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 1–2) and Albertan legal and political discourses on gender and sexuality have continually placed queers and gender non-conformists as *not normal* Albertans (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). Evangelical Christianity and moral traditionalism within the province have historically influenced these discourses, particularly in regard to key issues such as sexuality, reproduction, and school choice initiatives. From 1932 to 1968, The Social Credit Party set particularly strong foundations for religious conservatism with explicit Christian fundamentalist ties (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). Although the Progressive Conservatives, who maintained power from 1971 to 2015, were less explicit in their version of religious and social conservatism, they nonetheless catered to the desires of the high percentages of evangelical Protestants in their party (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). During their time in government, they consistently showcased anti-lgbtqq+ policy initiatives, denying inclusion of sexual orientation in the Individual Rights Protection Act in the 1970s, 1980s, early 1990s, and again in the mid-1990s (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). The exclusion of sexual orientation was actually one of the central issues in the province from the 1970s to the 1990s (Bonnett, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 9). In fact, Alberta was the second-to-last province to write in those basic legal protections against discrimination for gays and lesbians (and much later for transgender people). Although moral traditionalist voices are becoming a minority in Alberta, the province has a history of and a reputation for maintaining anti-lgbtqq+ laws and discourses (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012; Filax, 2006; Bonnett, 2006; Grace & Wells, 2017). When compared to other Canadian provinces, an opinion poll demonstrates that Albertans are currently only “modestly more traditional than other Canadians, and only on some ‘morality’ issues” (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 1); however, the province is distinguished by higher proportions of evangelical Protestants than any other province (p. 5), and “this evangelical current has continued to retain political

visibility that is not nearly as evident in other provinces except perhaps Saskatchewan” (p. 24). Importantly, PCs have catered to evangelical views on gender and sexuality,<sup>49</sup> and they have been willing to “marshal language on LGBT rights issues that would be regarded as extreme in most other parts of Canada” (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 9). In fact, more Christians vote for PCs than any other party in Alberta and

according to [a] 2008 Stewart and Sayers survey, 61 percent of Christian literalists reported voting for the PCs, a sharp break from the rest of the population, among whom only 39 percent supported the party. This meant that literalists made up almost half (48 percent) of PC voters. The same survey showed that PC supporters were significantly more likely to be morally conservative than supporters of the main opposition parties<sup>50</sup> in 2008. (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 9)

Michael Phair, an openly gay man who served on Edmonton city council from 1992 to 2007, speaks to this evangelical conservative stereotype that frames Alberta as way behind other provinces in terms of human rights issues, particularly in regard to gender and sexuality.

I think for a long time, the sense was that we were way behind. I think in Edmonton that was not accurate. I think response by Edmontonians was much more moderate for many, many years and much more progressive. Across Canada, people thought Alberta was redneck and cowboys and all that... without recognizing, particularly in the major cities, that things were changing rapidly. (2017)

In Edmonton, and Alberta more generally, there were two major watershed events that catalyzed both lgbttq+ activist groups and the intensification of government opposition to lgbttq+ rights in the province: the Pisces bathhouse<sup>51</sup> raid on May 20, 1981 and the Delwin Vriend case in 1998.<sup>52</sup> As I’ll discuss in

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<sup>49</sup> This phenomenon is connected to other political factors, such as electoral boundaries in Alberta that have favoured rural voters, who tend to be more socially conservative.

<sup>50</sup> The main opposition parties at the time were the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party.

<sup>51</sup> The legal name of the establishment was Pisces Health Spa.

<sup>52</sup> The appellant in *Vriend v. Alberta* was Delwin Vriend, an Edmontonian employed at King’s College who was fired from his job at an Edmonton Christian college in 1991 because he was gay.

this chapter, a number of other legislative moves were implemented in order to block the progress of the gay and lesbian rights movement that was occurring in Alberta and across Canada. In Canada, police raids on bathhouses and gay spas began in 1976, and thousands of men were arrested across the country (Bonnett, 2006, p. 127). The Pisces bathhouse raid occurred just a few months after the infamous Toronto bathhouse raids,<sup>53</sup> which are often referred to as the Stonewall of Canada. Bathhouses emerged in North America in the 1980s “in response to the imposition of a severely limited private sphere” (p. 126). During this time, gay men used “gay bath houses, public washrooms and specific areas within public parks to engage in sexual activities, thereby re-defining privacy and confusing the traditional boundaries of public and private” (Bonnett, 2006, p. 127). Bonnett also notes that police began to justify their harassment by aligning gay male sexuality and sexual spaces with dirtiness, deviance, and sadomasochism (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 126–127).

In Edmonton, police had formed a division called the Edmonton Morality Squad who took on the task of raiding (Phair, 2017; Bonnett, 2006, pp. 127–128). On May 20, 1981, 54 police officers “smashed through the back door of Pisces and raced through the premises—videos whirling and cameras flashing” (Phair, 2008). In the end, 56 men were arrested and charged with being found in a common bawdy house, and four men were charged with owning a bawdy house (Bawdy House Law, 1981; Bonnett, 2006; Holata, 2015; Phair, 2008). In this context, sex between consenting adults was found indecent, but you didn’t have to be engaged in sex to get arrested; you just had to physically be there. Police were using vague laws around bawdy houses that were intended to regulate prostitution (Bonnett, 2006), and the law “described anyone caught in a bawdy house as a ‘found-in’ and, thus, guilty of a criminal offence” (Phair, 2008, 2017).

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<sup>53</sup> The Toronto bathhouse raids occurred on February 5, 1981 and involved over 100 police raiding four gay bathhouses. According to Slaughter from CTVNews.ca, “nearly 300 men were arrested... and charged with owning or being found in a common bawdy house” (June 22, 2016).

Those men arrested spent the night in jail and had to provide information about the bathhouse in addition to personal information about their lives as gay men and about their sexual practices (Munro, 1981 as cited in Bonnett, 2006, p. 128); this information would later be used to help prosecute other “found-ins” (Bonnett, 2006, p. 128). According to Phair, the names of those charged were publicly shown on television, and several in newspapers (2017). In contrast to the Toronto bathhouses cases,<sup>54</sup> the owners of the Pisces pleaded guilty to owning a bawdy house; this left little room for appeal for all the men charged.<sup>55</sup> Michael Phair recalled that the Pisces raid was frightening and devastating for many, but he noted that it also spurred movement and increase in activist involvement. He said, “There was the feeling that in Edmonton, in a sense, that if you just kinda stayed under the radar you’d be fine. Police changed that. All of a sudden all these people were arrested” (2017). Bonnett (2006) corroborates this claim that bathhouses operated in Edmonton for 10 years without police interference as long as the spaces were out of public view, but once a public complaint was made, the bathhouses were brought into the “public sphere” (p. 133). Phair says further that he “thinks [the raid] coloured the community’s sense of the police for many years, and still does maybe a bit” (2017). The act was seen by many as harassment. Similarly, Holata (2015) argues that “the most significant

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<sup>54</sup> According to Phair (2017), Toronto bathhouse owners refused to plead guilty to owning a bawdy house, so it meant that for every individual charged, prosecution had to prove that it was in fact a bawdy house. As a result, many of the cases just disappeared.

<sup>55</sup> Although “representatives of the gay and lesbian community, found-ins and friends formed the Privacy Defence Committee to raise funds and support found-ins. . . . eventually 47 found-ins pled guilty; six were convicted after trials. Two persons were unaccounted for and one man was acquitted. Appeals nearly a year later resulted in two or three honourary discharges” (Phair, 2008).

legacy of the raid was the empowerment of the LGBTQ community and its allies. The quick mobilization of the public proved to police that the liberties of everyone had to be respected and harassment would not be tolerated.” In quick response to the raid, members of Edmonton’s Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) accused the police of harassment and campaigned against them (Hull & Zdeb, 1981); the Privacy Defence Committee of Edmonton was formed by GATE and by many of those arrested in the Pisces raid in order to both help raise money for legal fees for found-ins of the Pisces raid and to make changes to the Criminal Code (“PDCE Formed to Fight Back,” 1981). The *Edmonton Journal’s* editorial page even came out in support, calling for “an amendment to the bawdy house laws of the Criminal Code of Canada, arguing that ‘public revulsion’ of an act did not necessarily require prosecution of those who engage in private acts among consenting adults” (Bonnett, 2006, pp. 131–132; Bawdy House Law, 1981). Importantly, this response in Edmonton to the Pisces raid helped strengthened solidarity and mobilization among gays and lesbians across Canada (Bonnett, 2006, p. 132).

The *Vriend v. Alberta* (1998) case marks the second, and perhaps more significant, watershed in lgbttq+ rights in Alberta (and Canada) because it put policy in place at a national level. The appellant in *Vriend v. Alberta* was Delwin Vriend, an Edmontonian employed at King’s College, an Edmonton Christian college. In 1991, he was fired from his job because he was gay. After being turned away from the Alberta Human Rights Commission, his case went to the Supreme Court of Canada as a “constitutional challenge to the exclusion of sexual orientation from provincial human rights law” (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 10; Filax, 2006). Throughout the case, many community groups, unions, and lawyers came together to support Vriend because it became evident after 20+ years of advocacy that the province wasn’t going to do it on its own (Phair, 2017). Before Vriend and before the Klein era, lgbttq+ advocacy groups, including Councillor Michael Phair, had met with the Human Rights Commission, which oversees the Individual Rights Protection Act, encouraging them to recommend that the government include sexual orientation (Phair, 2017). Although the Commission initially seemed uninformed about gays and lesbians, lgbttq+ advocacy groups eventually started to get a more sympathetic hearing. In fact, the Commission recommended to the

Legislature that they include sexual orientation on two or three occasions (Phair, 2017). However, in those days, the commission clearly reported to the Minister of Labour rather than the Legislature as a whole, and he refused to take it forward. Shortly after Klein came to office as premier, he undermined the commission by appointing more conservative members and decreasing funding to staff the Commission (Phair, 2017). Supporters in Edmonton and Calgary responded, and eventually the Commission began to hold public meetings about more overarching changes that needed to be made to the Individual Rights Protection Act, including pregnancy, mental health, and sexual orientation. At that time, Michael Phair was able to convince city council to include sexual orientation into the City of Edmonton's employment standards; the city council then sent him to the Commission hearings to speak on behalf of the city about their policy and why it was needed across the province.

During this time, the Vriend case was still playing out, and evangelical conservatives were rallying to defend what they saw as the destruction of family values. The popular and widely distributed weekly right-wing newsmagazine the *Alberta Report (AR)*, for example, disseminated hateful and extreme depictions of gay people as disease-ridden sexual predators and recruiters of Albertan youth; it simultaneously attacked feminism and feminist University departments as threats to democracy and masculinity (Filax, 2006). During the 1990s, the *AR* was distributed for free to schools, libraries, and businesses, and “was regularly engaged in its letters page by university presidents, academics, politicians, and other prominent citizens” (Fraser and Grundy as cited in Filax, 2006, p. xiii). As one of the few discourses available on homosexuality at the time in the province, the *AR* had considerable influence on discourses about social values and had “the most complete and comprehensive coverage of queer issues in the province during the 1990s” (Filax, 2006, p. xiii). Below are several *AR* article titles, which demonstrate the kinds of discourses about sexual and gender minorities perpetuated in Alberta and supported by provincial PC politicians:

The Gay Sore Erupts Again: As the UC Agonizes, a Cleric Appears in Full Frontal Glory (R. White, *AR*, 15, March 1993, pp. 36–7).

Helping Kids Become Gay: A Medical Conference in Edmonton Promotes Teen Homosexuality (J. Demers, *AR*, 10 May 1993, p. 40).

The Skater-Boy Who Wasn't: A Lesbian in Drag Seduces Young Girls (D. Sheremeta, *AR*, 6 May 1996, p. 25).

The Protestants Tackle Another Reformation: Calgary Evangelicals Gather against the Advance of the Gay Curriculum (J. Woodard, *AR*, 16 September 1996, p. 32).

The Devil in Disguise: Angels in America (*AR* cover, 7 October 1996, p. 1).

If You've Got 'Em, Flaunt 'Em: An Estrogen-Laden Convict Wants a Taxpayer-Funded Sex Change (L. Sillars, *AR*, 6, January, 1997, pp. 22–3).

After almost a decade, the Supreme Court ruled in *Vriend's* favor in 1998, “reading in” sexual orientation to Alberta’s Individual Rights Protection Act and marking a monumental victory for gay and lesbian advocates (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012; Filax, 2006; Phair, 2017; Bonnett, 2006). It wasn’t until after the *Vriend v. Alberta* (1998) decision, when the Supreme Court forced Premier Klein’s government to add sexual orientation to the Human Rights Code (HRC), that the government eventually conceded on this issue, and they did so only after entertaining invoking the notwithstanding clause (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005) due to extreme backlash and pressure from evangelical Christians in the province (Filax, 2006; Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012). Phair confirms that

there was a huge outcry . . . by very right-wing religious groups in the province. [They] acted like the world was ending. It was awful. One of the worst times I’ve lived through. Not just me. Gays and lesbians. It was vitriolic. There was hatred. Threats. Regular talk shows filled with people saying how awful this was. And Klein said he was going to use the notwithstanding clause. Which he couldn’t do actually, but that’s beside the point; but it further exacerbated and brought out more of that [outcry/hatred]. (2017)

Although the *Vriend* decision explicitly ruled that excluding sexual orientation violated the Charter, Klein “confirmed that instead he would create a committee to review the statutes of Alberta and construct ‘legislative fences’ to protect the province from any further implications that might arise from the *Vriend* decision (Government of Alberta, 1998 as cited in Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 333). Filax reveals that Klein “defended this position by indicating that ‘severely normal’ Albertans do not support such measures” (2006, pp. xii–xii). Even once they conceded to abide by the ruling, they still refused to amend the legislation (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 333).

Even though Klein didn't invoke the notwithstanding clause, one year after the *Vriend* decision the government explicitly excluded same-sex couples from legislation on common-law relationships (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012; Harder, 2009; Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005). The legislative moves made by the Klein government after the *Vriend* ruling demonstrate their strategic use of vocabulary and legislative gymnastics to preserve the supposed integrity of the words "spouse" and "marriage", and to ultimately uphold the sanctity of heterosexual unions (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005). At first, the government's move to exclude same-sex couples by diversifying interdependent relationships beyond just conjugal relationships seemed to work toward a more radical, queer political agenda that would see the institution of marriage largely destroyed as the basis for citizenship and social legitimization. But even with the diversification, the supremacy of marriage was enforced in all of the legislative language. Moreover, the implications of these "legislative fences" continued to impinge on the civil rights of gays and lesbians as visible citizens. And as Harder (2009) suggests, the diversification of legitimate relationships also "may be overwhelmed by a widely cast net of ascription, creating potential for a hyperneoliberal, hyperprivatized, regime of personal obligation" (p. 646).

Shortly after the *Vriend* decision, the Supreme Court ruling in the landmark *M. v. H.* (1999)<sup>56</sup> case in Ontario had widespread implications for same-sex couples (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005; Harder, 2009). Lloyd and Bonnett (2005) note that with this decision, "it became overnight constitutionally impermissible to maintain or abide any legislative distinction between same and opposite sex couples" (p. 334). Although somewhat delayed, Alberta's first legislative response to this ruling was an amendment to the Marriage Act (2000), which sought to define marriage as something solely between a man and a woman. Although decisions about

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<sup>56</sup> "In *M.v. H.*, the Court found that the exclusion of same-sex couples from the spousal support provisions of Ontario's Family Law Act violated the equality guarantee of the Charter" (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 334).

marriage are out of provincial jurisdiction, the Bill passed anyways (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 337). “Alberta’s Legislative Assembly,” Lloyd & Bonnett contend, “was apparently content to ignore Canada’s constitutional structure in order to preserve marriage in Alberta as the domain solely of Alberta’s heterosexuals” (p. 337). Similarly, in 2000, Alberta’s Domestic Relations Act was amended in response to the ruling in *Taylor v. Rossu* by the Alberta Court of Appeal (1998); this ruling effectively gave heterosexual common-law couples the same kinds of “spousal support provisions” as married couples (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2006, p. 335). To protect the holy purity of the term spouse, Alberta’s Domestic Relation Act was thus amended to define “spouse” as stemming from marital or common-law relations, and common-law relationship as one between two people of the opposite sex (p. 335). As Lloyd & Bonnett (2005), Bonnett (2006), and Harder (2009) demonstrate, Alberta responded with more resistance to similar appeals made by same-sex couples in regard to the definition of spouse.

The Adult Interdependent Relationship Act (2003 and 2004) demonstrates some of the most explicit forms of legislative gymnastics to protect the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, including the term spouse. The Act begins by reminding us of the primacy of marriage among all relationships and reiterates language used in the Marriage Act equating marriage as the union between a man and a woman (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, pp. 337–338). The purpose of the Act, however, was to recognize “other” kinds of relationships which they labeled as “adult interdependent relationships” rather than directly including same-sex relationships (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005; Harder, 2009). With this Act, “all forms of close relationships were deemed potentially eligible for recognition” (Harder, 2009, p. 643), and the Act did little more than “anoint common law couples including same sex couples with a new name carrying an oddly simian acronym [AIPS]” (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005, p. 338). Beyond the implications for same-sex couples, the effects of this Act interestingly “[diversifies] the realm of legitimated relationships, thus expanding obligations and access to benefits;” which has the hyperneoliberal potential to offload obligations for care from the state onto individuals (Harder, 2009, pp. 645–646).

In July 2005, after the federal legalization of same-sex marriage with the Civil Marriage Act, “The editorial pages of the Edmonton Journal and the Calgary Herald soon filled with letters, some verging on hate-speech, accusing the Supreme Court of granting homosexuals ‘special rights’ and of fomenting, among other things, sin, bestiality, pedophilia, and the destruction of the family” (Filax, 2006, p. 78). These homophobic discourses, regardless of whether you read *AR*, were part of mainstream media, including print, radio, and television (Filax, 2006, p. 118); thus, they played a significant role in shaping the status of and the environment for queers and gender non-conformists in Alberta. Although Klein eventually conceded and did not invoke the notwithstanding clause after the legalization of same-sex marriage, the Alberta Minister of Justice at the time entertained the idea of invoking the notwithstanding clause “to protect the right of provincial officials to opt out of marrying same-sex couples,” and that “in response to a private member’s bill permitting marriage commissioners to refuse to perform them, he said that he and the majority of his caucus supported the measure” (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 11). Even after Klein, the PCs continued to use public policy to demonstrate their anti-sexual-diversity sentiments. The new PC leader, Ed Stelmach, resisted pressure from moral conservatives to limit the HRC’s scope and strength; however, he undermined the progress of sexual and gender diversity rights by refusing to include gender identity in the bill that was set to add sexual orientation to the Individual Rights Protection Act (p. 11). Similarly, in another anti-lgbtq+ policy move, “Bill 44 gratuitously added to that statute a stipulation that schools had to notify parents when classes were to engage ‘subject matter that deals explicitly with religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation,’ and that parents could have their children excluded from such classes” (p. 11). Not surprisingly, the shift toward support for school “choice” in the Alberta public school system has also allowed for the proliferation of publicly-supported evangelical-Christian-based schools (Rayside, Sabin, & Thomas, 2012, p. 9).

The election of the New Democratic Party (NDP) government in May 2015 marked a monumental shift in provincial politics, ending the PC party’s 40-year time in government. With this change came a sense of blossoming hope for many living in Alberta, particularly for lgbtq+ adults and youth. For example, the proposal and passing of Bill 7 in December 2015, which added protections for gender identity *and* expression

to the Alberta Human Rights Act, marked a significant shift in the socio-political climate for lgbttq+ people, insomuch as human rights legislation can be effective at improving the lives of these populations. This addition was particularly important for non-binary and transpeople living in Alberta; in Canada more broadly, for example, contemporary research from Ontario's Trans PULSE Project<sup>57</sup> identifies transpeople as one of the most disadvantaged groups in society in terms of prejudice, discrimination, hatred, and violence (2014, p. 5). This research group also demonstrates the negative impact of social marginalization on daily lives, health, and well-being of transpeople (2014, p. 5).

With the new NDP government, we also saw new and landmark legislation that shaped possibilities for lgbttq+ youth in Alberta in a more positive direction. In 2015, Bill 10 was passed, which forced all Alberta schools, including public, private, and charter schools, to allow gay-straight alliances (GSAs) on school property at a student's request. In response to allowing all schools to have GSAs, subsequent debates about parent disclosure emerged again in part because of the regressive parental clauses included in Bill 44 (PC legislation) "to appease social conservatives," in which the bill ultimately "served as legislative control inhibiting diversity in schooling" (Grace & Wells, 2016, p. 25).

The debates post-Bill 10 (and post-Bill 44) then focused on the rights of parents (for religious or other reasons) to be informed if their children were attending a GSA and obligations on the part of schools and teachers whether to inform parents or keep student information private and confidential. The NDP came out strongly in favor of protecting lgbttq+ youth in Alberta and proposed and passed Bill 24 to ensure this protection. The Bill passed in November 2017 (Bennett, 2017; An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances

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<sup>57</sup> Ontario's Trans PULSE Project largely informed Ontario Human Rights Commission's 2014 "Policy on Preventing discrimination because of gender identity and gender expression" (2014).

[ASGSA], 2017) and ensured that schools must “respect privacy law and keep confidential when a student attends a gay-straight alliance (GSA), queer-straight alliance (QSA) or similar club” (French, 2017). Bill 10 and Bill 24 close loopholes which were preventing students from setting up peer support groups and safeguards against students being outed to parents unless they are in danger or threat of harm. As a 17-year old transgender boy stated, “GSA meetings are sometimes the only place youths feel safe to be themselves. Some feel they would be in danger if their families learned about their identity” (as cited in French, 2017).

In 2016, the Government of Alberta also published “Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, and Gender Expressions.” These guidelines are intended to give specific guidelines for K–12 schools around topics such as respecting an individual’s right to self-identification; maintaining school records to respect privacy and confidentiality; ensuring dress codes respect people’s gender identity/expression; minimizing gender-segregated activities; providing safe access to washroom and change rooms facilities; promoting healthy responses to bullying; and ensuring staff have safe work environments and protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This document also provides information on the specific provincial legislation, ministerial directives, and policies in place that require such support and protection (p. 2). In contrast to Alberta’s highly conservative history, the NDP government has been pushing forward legislation that explicitly protects lgbttq+ adults and youth. Kris Wells, the Director of the Institute for Sexual Studies and Services and assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta, said that “Bill 24 would make Alberta a national leader in school protections for LGBTQ people,” and that what “schools need now is training and professional development to put policy into action” (as cited in French, 2017).

Although not comprehensive, this snapshot of Alberta’s history of sexual and gender minority rights illustrates how, despite the recent legislative moves made by the NDP government, the lgbttq+ community in Alberta has experienced a socially conservative environment that marginalized them socially, politically, and economically. Queer and non-binary adults and youth have experienced alienation from all sorts of

institutions, such as family, church, school, healthcare, etc., and “rather than providing support, these institutions are leaders in stigmatizing and regulating homosexuality” (Filax, 2006, p. 56) and gender. Moreover, political discourses like those of the “homosexual menace” and “homosexual predator” placed queers and non-binary people outside the norm, affixing a derogatory outsider status to them. This status and these norms explain, in part, why lgbttq+ people need and seek alternative spaces like gay bars, GSAs, and drag spaces. As the remaining chapters demonstrate, social conservatism is a disposition that drag kinging strongly opposes. Over the course of several decades, drag kings in Alberta have continued to respond to this homophobic and transphobic socio-political milieu by seeking performative spaces that not only validated and valued their existence but also allowed them to mock camp-ily the outside hetero world and to express and experiment safely with identity, gender, and sexuality. As Mac U. More said:

I think the role of drag in the queer community partially exists because we don't get the opportunity to be represented elsewhere. Think about media, entertainment, theatre, art in general. Where is our representation? Outside of spaces like that. Where we aren't being labeled as some sort of freak or an exception to what's normal or exceptional, because it's just normal. It just is. (Mac U. More).

## Chapter Four — Edmonton's Drag King Legacy: 1997–2016

Although you might not expect to find a drag king scene in the Canadian prairies, kings have been performing in Edmonton since the beginning of the North American drag king boom in the mid-1990s. As Troka, Lebesco, and Noble asked in 2002, “drag kinging seemed well suited to San Francisco, but what was it doing on the windy plains of Alberta, Canada?” (p. 5). In fact, the Fake Mustache drag troupe of Calgary has been going strong for over a decade, and Edmonton has its own drag king legacy—from The Fly Bastards of the late 1990s, to The Alberta Beef and The Sirloins in the mid-to late 2000s, to Queer Royale in the early 2010s. For each troupe, in Edmonton particularly, drag offered a political and creative outlet for emerging queer politics, and for many it became an avenue for personal transformation. In this chapter, by piecing together stories from interviews and documentaries, I document the history of drag kinging from 1997 to 2013 in Edmonton both as an example of evolving feminist politics within the Edmonton queer community and as a testament to the enduring spirit of drag on the prairies. These stories set the ethnographic context for the study.

Although ideas of radicalness in queer art and politics may have changed on a meta level since the mid-1990s, for these kings, over the span of three decades, participating in this community art form was a kind of radical experimentation; for them and their communities, drag king performance functioned as both a tool of resistance and critical self-reflection on masculinity, identity, and power. Through the decades, we also witness changing ideas of feminist politics (of resistance) with the emergence and influence of queer theory and postmodern feminism (deconstruction and parodying masculinity) in the 1990s, to the increasing importance of intersectional feminism, physical and cultural accessibility, safer spaces, and consent. Although we still see political and theoretical motivations behind later troupes like The Alberta Beef and Queer Royale, including parody, we see more identity work in terms of self-exploration as well as the increasing importance of community support and validation of the gender expressions of these later drag kings. In performances and discussions, meta-critiques of drag kinging itself also emerge as kings start to acknowledge the potential of the form to become a conformist intervention; as such, they start to challenge the liberatory and

transgressive potential of kinging by investigating its limitations (e.g., speaking subject, focus on realism/passing, binary drag, misogyny, coherence).

Not surprisingly, as we move through the decades, we can also witness an explosion of gender identities and expressions beyond gender binaries and butch/femme relationships within drag performance and Edmonton queer communities more generally, as well as the increasing visibility of transpeople and trans communities.<sup>58</sup> Since the 1990s, drag kinging in both Edmonton and across Canada and the U.S., became less about just women performing masculinity and male impersonation and more about people of all gender subjectivities playing with gender, not necessarily just masculinity. We can find evidence of this cultural and performative trend within the drag kinging genre in Bobbie Nobel's work on drag kings in Toronto as well as from the documentary, *A drag king extravaganza* (2008), directed by Clare Smyth and Meaghan Derynck, which documents the International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE), a performative conference that ran for 14 years from 1999 to 2012 in the U.S. and Canada.

This chapter documents Alberta drag kinging on a historical and descriptive level, contributing to a queer cultural archive for people whose queer history is often lost in obscurity; this documentation, however, is not a complete picture but rather a series of snapshots pieced together from fragmented memories, photographs, and film. In subsequent chapters, I analyze the effects of this performance practice and the role it played in the lives of these Albertan kings.

### **The Fly Bastards: 1997–2003**

The Fly Bastards formed around 1997 or 1998 in Edmonton, Alberta. According to the Fly Bastards, at that time there was virtually no drag king scene besides a few performers here and there, usually with the

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<sup>58</sup> Edmonton had its first Women and Trans March in conjunction with Edmonton Pride in June 2016.

court system. Drag kinging at this time was much less well known, even within the lgbttq+ community, and like many other North American troupes of this era, the Fly Bastards were motivated by ideas of political radicalness and the emergence of queer theory and political queerness. That is to say, just being openly queer or gender-nonconforming in public was a radical act in Edmonton at that time. The lgbttq+ community in Edmonton in the 1990s was fairly small, and the trans community even smaller (and less visible). Donning a moustache and masculine dress in public was really pushing buttons. Going outside of gay bars was “danger time” (Jack). According to some of the Fly Bastards, it was a time and place when people were still going inside gay bars and baiting and attacking people inside them, but it was “definitely safer inside than out” (Jack). Muff E. Ohso describes Alberta as “so backwards on so many things for a long time.”

Although Pride parades garnered modest crowds at the time and Alberta maintained highly conservative political stances toward gay rights, the 1990s was also a time of change where sexual and gender minorities were starting to embrace and reclaim *queer* as a tool of resistance and critical questioning. Lgbttq+ communities in both Canada and the U.S. were starting to reclaim the word queer from its dominant use as an offensive, shame-inducing slur denoting moral and social deviance and pathologization (Butler, 1993, p. 226; Dyer, 2002, p. 1; Escudero-Alías 2009); instead, they started to shift the meaning of the word in their favour—to use it as a kind of ironic weapon. By doing so, some people in the lgbttq+ community sought to take both an anti-assimilationist stance and to include, under a non-normative identity term, a range of gender and sexual minorities including bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgender folk. The common adage, “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you” captures the political fervor of the time and in particular behind U.S. groups such as Queer Nation<sup>59</sup> and ACT UP, which sought to counter the style of assimilationist gay rights

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<sup>59</sup> Queer Nation was very active in Canada, particularly in Toronto.

organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign. Despite the progress of the gay rights movement, for example, some of the early assimilationist politics<sup>60</sup> were/are informed by the logics of normativity still pervasive in gay political platforms that privilege a certain type of homosexual (e.g., monogamous, married, cisgender, white, middle class, non-promiscuous). Queers were not only rebelling against mainstream societal values but also against the normative politics within the gay community. Importantly, Oscar de la Hymen talks about how “queer in terms of . . . who you sleep with versus your politics can be quite different.”

One such method of articulating these queer politics of resistance was through art; unsurprisingly, artistic and performative interventions were often met with considerable conservative backlash. Lloyd and Bonnett (2005) in their article, “The Arrested Development of Queer Rights in Alberta, 1990–2004” demonstrate how “gay and lesbian expression when asserted threatened the very existence of state funding of arts and culture and led to new forms of censorship” (p. 328). In 1992, the Vancouver-based lesbian theatre troupe, Kiss and Tell, performed a production at the Banff Centre for Arts “depicting lesbian sexuality in order to foster a discussion about pornography, erotica and sexuality” (p. 329), and in 1997, the Red Deer and District Museum (RDDM) got a \$10,000 Researching Communities Grant from the Alberta Museums Association to “research and document gay life in central Alberta” (p. 331). Both the Kiss and Tell

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<sup>60</sup> Pre-Stonewall activists, for example, at Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in New York, often adopted homo-normative styles and platforms in order to acquire professional credentials and to legitimize their organizations (Marotta, 1981, p. 19). As Marotta explains: “Homosexuals who looked and acted ‘straight’ (heterosexual), preferred monogamous couplings, and confined their sexual activity to the bedroom were said to deserve rights and status; those who enjoyed promiscuity, pornography, sex role deviation, and cross dressing were said to have problems; and those who pursued sex in public places, . . . and fetishistic sexual activity were alternately pitied and denounced” (1981, p. 18).

production and the RDDM grant caused considerable controversy, and Conservatives lobbied to both censor lgbttq+ art from publicly-funded institutions and threatened to defund the arts in general (Lloyd & Bonnett, 2005). Similar backlash occurred in 1999 when the Canada Council funded Ilean Petrobruno of Vancouver \$60,000 in 1998–1999 to produce her campy film about a drag king pirate searching the West Coast for “treasure” (Naumetz, *Edmonton Journal*, 1999); shortly afterward, an MP condemned the funding decision contending that “federal funding for a soft-porn film and another movie about a lesbian ‘drag king’ searching for her genitalia threatens all government support for the arts” (Naumetz, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 1999). The 1990s were an interesting and contentious time, both for continued social conservatism and for queer political and artistic and performative interventions.

It was within this socio-political climate that the Fly Bastards emerged. They began with Jack Strap and Muff E. Ohso (and two other people that I didn’t interview) while both were doing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Alberta. They had already partnered up to form what Muff E. Ohso called a “lesbian terrorist group”—the KarmaKozies—which didn’t actually engage in terror, but were into planning actions and fucking things up in their conservative anti-lgbttq+ environment. They would poster Edmonton and had a manifesto about “how a *bit* Caucasian Edmonton felt, and just you know, our feminist issue of the week” (Muff E. Ohso). According to Jack Strap, Muff E. Ohso showed up one day with a copy of *The drag king book* and “was like, we gotta do this!” Muff E. Ohso reiterates and adds, “we had a terrorist group and we needed somebody to pay for photocopying our propaganda posts, and we couldn’t think of how to make money, and then we decided to put on a drag show because nobody would ever assume that these performers were secretly terrorists.” Other than trying to make money for their lesbian terrorist group, Muff E. Ohso adds they realized they had a “flair for the dramatics” when, instead of writing an essay, the two decided to do a performance piece “militantly gay bash[ing] our professor, who enjoyed it way too much, and our whole experiment backfired.” And so that was that. They then asked the “two butchest girls” they knew at the time to join, and went for it (Muff).

The Fly Bastards' first show at Buddy's on 124<sup>th</sup> Street didn't quite garner a crowd because they "never really told anyone except the girls we were seeing. So, totally like seven people there. And some disgruntled angry men that were like, 'why the fuck are these gross teenage girls in our bar?'" (Muff). So they decided to make posters. They had their first real show, which was actually their second show, on a Friday night at a "place called Secret? Or Sisters? Secret maybe? It was the only lesbian bar in Edmonton . . . . Something like that. Some cheesy name like that" (Muff).<sup>61</sup> But what made them bona fide was a drag queen in Edmonton named Twiggy.<sup>62</sup> After Muff E. Ohso told her how horrible their first show went, Twiggy was like, "why don't I just come and introduce you girls?" And she did—Muff E. Ohso recalls, "she totally just made us so legit, so that's when we made all the money."

After getting legit, the Fly Bastards performed for several years with Muff E. Ohso and Jack Strap as the core and several other kings who circulated in and out for performances. Muff E. Ohso recalls the Fly Bastards' numbers as "legendary," performing lip-synch songs such as David Lee Roth's "Just a Gigolo"; Muff and DEE, another member who joined about a year after they formed, also performed a Queen tour all the way across two bars in Edmonton. Many of these Queen songs were sung live. They performed at gay bars and at Loud and Queer, a long-standing Edmonton writing and performance showcase event curated, hosted, and directed by Edmonton drag queen, Gloria Hole (a.k.a. Darrin Hagen).<sup>63</sup> Here they sang cabaret

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<sup>61</sup> The official name of this lesbian bar was Secrets (verified by seven Edmonton lesbians and the internet).

<sup>62</sup> You can find out more about Twiggy in the 1980s and 1990s in Darrin Hagen's book, *The Edmonton queen: not a riverboat story* (1997).

<sup>63</sup> For more information on The Loud & Queer Cabaret: see <https://www.facebook.com/Loud-Queer-Cabaret-169760773035640/>.

numbers like “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen. Muff E. Ohso eventually began writing his own music and singing/performing live with his band, GK and the Press Plays.

The influence of queer theory and political queerness for the Fly Bastards cannot be overstated. For the two main instigators of the troupe, Jack Strap and Muff E. Ohso, doing drag kinging felt radical and like something that needed to be done, as no one else was doing it—at least not in Edmonton. Drag was a source of fun, but also a political and creative expression during their early formative years as students in University; it was an outlet when the two were coming of age during an era of burgeoning queer theory and queer politics. For Jack Strap, although drag kinging wasn’t long-lasting and, in a way, was something they just did at that particular time in their life—it was also formative. Jack says, at age 20, drag kinging was an “expression of my emerging politics of being a queer and a gender fucker; forming something about myself at a turning point in my life.” And even though they might have “refined [their] views on how that gender fuckery can take place now,” they still embrace a lot of those views. As Muff recalls, “in the height of my brain exploding in the birth of what I thought was a time where critical gender theory was exploding. It was like, THE moment in the ‘90s where you could actually say a whole bunch of things that you could have never said before.” For Muff, embodying a different character “really solidified the concept of performance in identity” and helped them understand power around physicality in things such as “how much space you take up” and how to navigate interpersonal interactions. For Jack Strap, they were also very interested in gender as performance, contemporary postmodern feminism, and exploring identity as a construction. At that time, performing masculinity for Jack Strap was a way of deconstructing it; they were “always interested in performing gender and failing, but ‘failing’ in order to show the gaps where gender is constructed and how it fails all people, to basically queer it.” Jack Strap speaks to these same interests in their scholarly article, “Walk like a man: enactments and embodiments of masculinity and the potential for multiple genders,” published in *The drag king anthology* (2002). Motivated by political queerness within lesbian and feminist contexts, the Fly Bastards in Alberta began with ideas of expanding gender and/or eliminating gender all together through hyperbolic enactments of masculinity so that audiences could see their constructions (Koenig, 2002, p. 150).

However, these ideas of identity as performance didn't entirely resonate with DEE, another Fly Bastard member. For DEE, kinging was an important part of their transition into a stable male identity because it allowed him to experiment with passing for the first time, and he liked socializing in drag after shows and being read as male. As DEE recalls, performing hyperbolized masculinity for laughs wasn't something he felt comfortable doing: it felt "too close to home." When he started doing drag, he was identifying as butch, but also "shall we say, gender questioning at that point," and what he was studying in school was helping him with that questioning that he "may have even by that point have already started suggesting to people, and to myself, that I was trans, [which is] probably why they were like 'oh yeah you have to do this.'" For DEE, however, "those two things don't go hand in hand." Because of a tension between being and performing, DEE felt more awkward doing drag, more so "than they did when they weren't trans, you know? Because for them it was like a laugh. Like, 'oooooh look, guys are so funny, they make such big movements,' and this kind of thing." As I discuss in Chapter Five, DEE's story illustrates one of the tensions between drag and trans communities as drag kinging can play different kinds of roles depending on a person's feelings about their own gender in that particular moment.

Where many first-wave kings in both Edmonton (Fly Bastards, 1997) and Toronto (Greater Toronto Drag King Society, 1995) embarked on tearing down heterosexual masculinity through mimicry and parody, second-wave kings, as I'll describe later, in both cities seem to reveal the increasing slippages between butch, female masculinity, and transmasculinities. In some ways, we can attribute these slippages to the evolving theoretical and political ideas within queer theory/queerness, and in other ways to the increasing visibility and acceptance of transpeople within the lgbttq+ community as well as the increasing accessibility to medical transitioning options (e.g., hormones, surgery). The practice of drag kinging evolved in respect to these broader socio-political changes and to a simultaneous explosion of gender identity terms and expressions that came with those changes. Jack Strap comments on how their ideas of "what drag kinging is" changed when they moved from Edmonton to Toronto in the early- to mid-2000s where they found a different scene:

When I came here [Toronto], most of the people who were doing drag here were mostly interested in going up and being hot. Like, being sexy. Which at the time I didn't really think of as radical, but then I became more involved with the trans community here and I realized that over the years, that this is actually a community, one of very few communities at the time, I mean the trans community here is a lot bigger now, it's not perfect or anything, but it's a lot bigger. But at that time, that was one of the only places where, you know, people who were identifying as lesbians at the time, or drag kings at the time, who would eventually come out as trans men, this is one of the only places where they were able to express their gender identity in a way that was affirming. And that was also radical, which I can see now which I did not recognize at the time. So, I don't know, drag is a lot of different things now.

What Jack Strap witnessed at that time was likely what Noble (2006) describes as the second wave of Toronto drag kings—a time and space when kings were “dis-identified with lesbian culture even though they perform in lesbian contexts” (p. 54). Instead, we begin to see affiliations between king performances and gay and trans masculinities. Whereas the first wave engaged in masculinity mimicry, the second wave begins to “complicate that mimicry through an increasing identification with masculinity and disidentification with exclusively lesbian subject positions” (Noble, 2006, p. 54). Noble further describes overlapping third (e.g., the Big Daddy Kings and United Kingdom) and fourth (e.g., Bois Will Be Boys and KingSize Kings) waves where “gender identifications and affiliations are all but rendered incoherent” (p. 54).

Although the Fly Bastards had a good run, Muff E. Ohso and Jack Strap stopped doing drag primarily because, for them, it began to lose its radicalness and edginess. It was no longer new or underground. As Muff E. Ohso explains,

I mean the second I stopped doing drag, I hate to sound like the dick I'm going to sound like, I was like 'Jack Strap, it's over'. And she's like 'No no, it's not over.' And I'm like, 'Dude, it's over.' Like, anything we did radical is over because I've just been asked by my Women's Studies professor and my English professor to come teach a class on it at the U of A. It's over, we have to stop doing this.

When I asked Muff further why this meant the end, they said point blank: “Because my teacher was asking me to do it in an institution. It was no longer underground. There was nothing seemingly secret about it. And the only reason I wanted to do anything is because it's secret and underground. I later realized that isn't everybody's motivation, but it certainly was mine” (Muff).

Similarly, Jack Strap stopped doing drag because of a loss of both radicalness and community: “we were challenging people in a way that they needed to be challenged.” But in Toronto, it didn't feel that way.

In comparison to Edmonton, Toronto was a “way bigger,” city that “had all of their growing pains already, and now they were having their insights” (Jack Strap). After moving to Toronto, they also didn’t quite have the same kind of community that they felt with Muff E. Ohso and the Fly Bastards in Edmonton. When they came to Toronto, they “didn’t get a good feel for that community from the couple times [they] performed.” So, they stepped away. Years later when they were asked to join a drag burlesque group, even though they felt part of that community, they “no longer felt the need to perform masculinity” (Jack Strap).

A decade after the Fly Bastards began, another drag king troupe emerged in Edmonton, also instigated by University of Alberta students. There are some connections between the two troupes, although it took some digging. I knew there were drag kings performing in Edmonton in the late 1990s because I had read one of the Fly Bastards scholarly articles in the *Drag King Anthology* (Noble, 2002). I was able to connect with the author (and other Fly Bastards through snowball sampling) through a friend and colleague, Danielle Peers, who had been in queer (and academic) scenes in Edmonton for long time (and who was also involved with The Alberta Beef as a filmmaker for the documentary, *And The Rest is Drag* (Peers, Mootoo, & Brittain, 2009).

### **Alberta Beef: 2007–2009**

The Alberta Beef began their reign around 2007. The main drive and instigator behind the troupe was a then-PhD student, Lucas Crawford (a.k.a. Lawrence of Alabia), who is now a university professor. The original Alberta Beef included seven main kings: Buzz Vb Brater, Lawrence of Alabia, Lil’ Mack, Oscar de la Hymen, Rusty Nails, Randy Packer, and one other drag king; a few other drag kings also circulated in and out of shows. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to interview Lucas Crawford, but I was able to interview five kings: Lil’ Mac, Oscar de la Hymen, Rusty Nails, LJ Steele, and Randy Packer. Part of the Alberta Beef story can also be

found in the 32-minute KingCrip Productions Documentary, *And the Rest is Drag* (2009),<sup>64</sup> directed by Melisa Brittain (Buzz Vb), Danielle Peers,<sup>i</sup> and Shani Mootoo; this film helps to fill in some of the gaps in the Alberta Beef story and to shed light on some of the experiences of kings not interviewed in my research. According to the directors, the documentary “explores gender from the perspective of drag kings who consciously and politically queer their gender, both on and off stage” (Brittain, Peers, & Mootoo, 2009). The film features the Alberta Beef and Sir Loins as well as gender theorists Bobbie Nobel and Jack Halberstam.



Image 1: The Alberta Beef, Mid-200s

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<sup>64</sup> Video trailer: [link](#).

The Alberta Beef put on three main shows and performed in a number of other smaller-scale shows over the course of two to three years. If you talk to anyone who was part of the Beef or who went to one of their shows, they will tell you that Edmonton lesbians and gay men came out in droves to witness these kings and this cultural moment in time. The late LJ Steele recalls, for example, that “It was crazy times. We worked our butts off. And it showed because when we did events, you know, we’d do them once or twice a year, the venue would be sold out to the point that people would be standing on top of pool tables to get views.”

Randy Packer speaks to this special moment in time, which they believe reflected a need for drag king entertainment in Edmonton:

I think to my knowledge in Edmonton, there had never been a drag king troupe that had done their own show. Like if there were ever kings performing, they were always performing with the Court, and there would be maybe one or two numbers, but it was never like a troupe had done a whole show. So, I think obviously we hit a niche at that time that hadn’t been filled and people were excited about it.

Although the Alberta Beef came 10 years after the Fly Bastards, the Beef’s drag was still influenced by the conservative socio-political climate that surrounded them, and they were still politically motivated and influenced by queer theory and queer politics much like the Fly Bastards. The ongoing struggle for lgbttq+ rights in Alberta was still underway (e.g., conservative backlash from 2005 federal marriage equality, inclusion of gender identity/expression in the Alberta Individual Rights Protection Act, HRCMAA). Oscar de la Hymen says: “when I lived there at least, it was such a right-wing conservative government and there was such a right-wing conservative ethos. And it just created a much more radical community in many ways. And that was great.” Although the Fly Bastards speak to the loss of radicalness in drag kinging at the end of their era, the emergence of the Alberta Beef 10 years later seems to suggest that there was still some political potential and cultural work left in the drag king. However, the Beef weren’t just concerned with deconstructing masculinity and revealing gender as a performance; they were also interested in exploring intersectional feminism (e.g., intersections of gender with class, race, size, ability, etc.), and critiquing the binary conventions of drag (kinging). As Buzz Vb says, “nothing is necessarily transgressive about being a drag king” (Brittain, Peers, & Mootoo, 2009); drag kinging has as much potential to re-inscribe misogyny and

harmful gendered, racial, and classist stereotypes as it does to subvert them. Similarly, Peers (2011) says the motivations for making their documentary on Edmonton drag king troupes such as the Alberta Beef and the Sirloins were to

offer a more complex, post-structural reading of drag—to challenge the often-celebratory drag story of it always already being a radical act, but to try to present it as one layered with possibilities of reflecting, reflecting on, reproducing and/or resisting certain power relations and violences (regarding gender and other embodiments). The argument was not that this drag troupe does this, per se, but rather to follow and poke at the different motivations, creations, performances (on and off stage) and politics of the various kings as a way to think about how they did or did not manage to pull off this complexity.

The Alberta Beef attempted to push gender boundaries, particularly in relation to the more mainstream ideas of drag within the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR) in Edmonton at the time. LJ Steele, a long-time member and former Emperor in the court system, talks about how the Court at that time had a “certain layout” that typically only included drag kings (i.e., cismale performers) and drag queens without much gender blurring on stage. After his involvement with the Beef, he formed a drag king troupe, Collision Course, that did engage in gender blurring, and recalls how these performances “started making people of the Court kind of question and consider that we don’t need just drag kings and drag queens, that we can open up to different genders.” In relation to the Court and the Alberta Beef, Lil’ Mack says that “I think he [Lucas] wanted to do something a little more campy, a bit more flamboyant, and obviously a little more critical, particularly in terms of some of the numbers we picked.” Much like the Fly Bastards, the hyperbolized Alberta redneck masculinities were still a staple for the Beef, but the Beef also did numbers that sought to blur gender, to perform incoherence, and to offer more trans representation, fag drag, and fat body acceptance within queer culture.

The Beef did a variety of numbers including, but not limited to, a white rapper’s number, George Michael fag drag, a BDSM number, Alberta cowboys, construction workers, sporty boxing lads, tuxedo lads singing, “I’ve got the biggest balls of them all,” and even a drag queen number. Some were comedic, some were political, while others were pure sex appeal. Lawrence of Alabia and Randy Packer recall one of their performances of George Michael’s “Faith” where they cut huge holes in the butts of their jeans:

**Lucas Crawford:** The reason for me when, we talked about baring our asses in the George Michael number was that its sort of his classic move you know that made him so famous, his super tight little jeans and his tight little hot gay-boy butt. And that's the kind of move that he does that we did.

**Randy Packer:** We took a little more off the jeans than we planned (both laughing).

**Lucas Crawford:** Like, that's my whole ass.

**Randy:** my whole cheek is out there and it's shaking.

**Lucas Crawford:** It really had to be bare ass. Because I think there's some things about fat bodies that people can kinda see as queer. Like tits and whatever. But like, fucking fat ass. And not like booty, like grindy. But I'm slamming this Jello-style and you're gonna like it. Or hate it. (Brittain, Peers, & Mootoo, 2009)

In comparison to the Fly Bastards, the Beef also did a bit of class drag and some post-performance reflection on class in particular (i.e., Alberta cowboys, sporty boxers, construction workers). Class drag is when you perform, through parody or mimicry, elements of particular socio-economic classes; for example, a construction worker is a blue-collar working-class kind of masculinity. Some of the Beef kings reflect on some of these choices with regret, while others recall the therapeutic effect of enacting familiar and oppressive working-class masculinities. Buzz Vb speaks to some of the troupe's challenges around the intersections of class, race, and masculinity:

We would start out attempting to critique dominant masculinities. But we'd do that by performing class drag, right? So here we have some dykes dragging construction workers or rural cowboy culture and we could be critiquing that, but there are all these intersections that might give a middle-class white woman more privilege than rural working-class cowboys. The hard thing to do was make whiteness visible, make able-bodiedness visible, and make class visible in a way that we were drawing attention to it in order to show how these things reinforce white male power. (Brittain, Peers, & Mootoo, 2009)

Indeed, Oscar de la Hymen regrets how classist the drag shows were. At that time, she hadn't studied masculinity or gender theory and felt bad about parodying working-class masculinities. She recalls that the Beef, following reflections on class, did a performance of "guys in top hats" but felt that that wasn't quite enough because "the guys in top hats were classy, right?" She was further put off by king performances that

demonstrated a high degree of misandry, particularly in relation to working-class men: “I was not comfortable [with it] . . . because I grew up poor and in a trailer, and they were basically making fun of rural poor men, and I was like, I hate this. I just hated it actually.” She later commented that “it would be nice to see male politicians” in drag king performances. In contrast, Rusty Nails grew up in a rural Mormon ranching family in Southern Alberta, with oppressive cowboys in their family. They say, “who doesn’t love making fun of Alberta rednecks? . . . there was like some little part of me that felt like I was making fun of the men in my family, but I was also like, fuck you! (laughing).” Rusty “feel[s] like making fun of a dominant group is not changing it, it’s not tearing it down. I don’t really have a problem with it. [It’s a] way to make your displeasure known.”

Getting the chance to experiment on stage and experience audience validation of their performances came to play a significant role in Alberta Beef members’ personal lives and self-perceptions. In addition to political expression, drag was an important piece in their gender journeys to non-binary identities and/or to finding a balance between masculinity and femininity within themselves.

### **The Sirloins: 2009**

After the Alberta Beef ended, Lil’ Mack formed a secondary group called the Sirloins. A few kings from the Beef were a part of the Sirloins, but most of this troupe were new kings. They only performed a few times, once with a 1980s hair-band mash-up at the Edmonton’s Exposure Queer Arts and Cultural Festival. Although this troupe was short lived, it was with this troupe and around this same time that the Edmonton drag king Ben Sover began their legacy along with their sidekick, Justin Time.

### **Ben Sover: 2009–2016**

“It all started with Mr. Pee Puddles,” says Ben Sover, reflecting on his first time in drag with the Moustache Mafia during his MFA at the University of Alberta. Dressed in trench coats in a stereotypical

pervert look, a group of drag kings ventured out into the night to the “only porn theatre<sup>65</sup> left in Edmonton, which has since shut down” (Ben Sover). Unfortunately, their outing became “quite awkward after a while” since they all sat in the front row right next to each other, which was obviously not what you do while watching inaudible hardcore porn with other people scattered about the theatre (Ben Sover).

Ben Sover later performed with the Sirloins and over the next few years performed solo and duet numbers with his sidekick, Justin Time. In Ben’s early drag days, he often donned a flashy baby blue shirt with a screen-printed golden crown on the back; tight, bright yellow bell-bottom pants with hand-sewn gold tassels and built-in tear-away snaps; and both shirt and pants featured hand-sewn gold sequins and ornamentation for that “flashy, over-the-top kind of Vegas-y look” (Image 2). Ben brought this look together with a big gold belt buckle shaped like a crown, large sideburn chops and a moustache, and towering mass of curled hair, shaved on the sides. Ben Sover was a big fan of props and was also well known for his thrusting dance moves and hint of creepiness; he performed in a variety of venues over the next few years in Edmonton doing lip-synch, a blog, and some live spoken-word performances. Ben Sover also had a number of other drag characters including Edward Emo and Andro Andy, an androgynous superhero (Image 4).

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<sup>65</sup> This was a porn theatre was called XXX and showed projected video porn with very low sound.

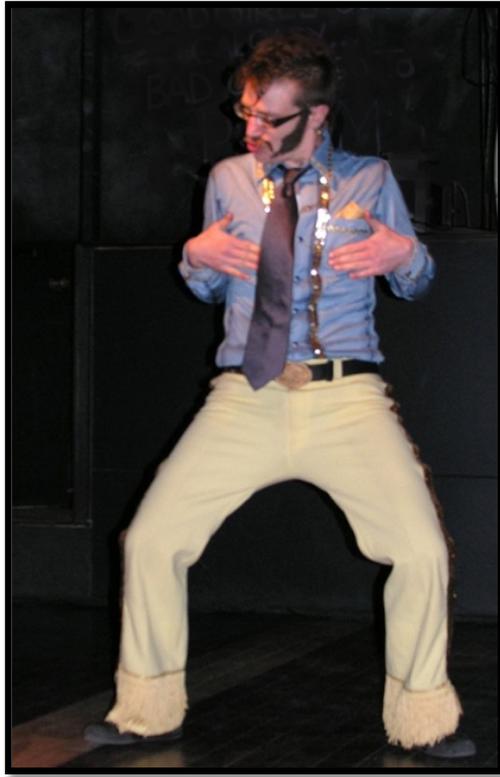


Image 2: Ben Sover at Prism, Edmonton, Alberta, Late 2000s



Image 3: Ben Sover, Late 2000s, by 3Ten Photo



**Image 4: Andro Andy, Late 2000s, by3Ten Photo**

Ben Sover performed with his drag brother, Justin Time four or five times throughout 2009–2010, putting on campy little numbers at shows like *Peckers*. Justin Time says, “it was mostly Ben Sover who roped me into it,” and it was a way to hang out with friends and experiment with passing and gender identity and expression. They had a bit of stage fright, so for them “it was more about the rehearsals and the play around the rehearsals rather than the performance aspect of it” that allowed them to feel safe exploring gender. Although Ben Sover’s drag brother, Justin Time, describes himself as “kind of like a piece of two-by-four on stage” and as “a background piece/object,” the two were quite the pair, putting on a George Michael fag drag tribute with cardboard guitars and performing homoerotic sailors to Elvis’s “A little less conversation” (Image 6). The two definitely didn’t shy away from the “performance of sexualized energy” or the “real



**Image 5: Ben Sover & Justin Time, late 2000s, by 3Ten Photo**

transaction of that energy between people on stage.” From the ridiculousness and fun of sexualizing office equipment like staplers and tape to the flirtatious and affirming exchange of sexual energy that comes with interacting and “locking eyes with someone,” these two report having a special bond.



**Image 6: "A Little Less Conversation" by Ben Sover & Justin Time at Edmonton's Queer Arts and Culture Festival, late 2000s, Edmonton, AB**

A few years later, after Justin Time had moved to another province and drag had started to lose its magic for Ben Sover, Ben met Ponyboi, who he says, “rekindled that interest” in drag, particularly in relation to crass humour. It wasn’t long after they met that Ben Sover became Ponyboi’s drag daddy, and they began exploring drag together in new ways. They soon became the drag duo, Ben & Pony, putting on their first show in the summer of 2012, featuring four sets of drag characters.

### **Ben and Pony: 2012–2013**

In the summer of 2012, Ben Sover and Ponyboi put on their first show, *BENT: an evening of queer performance*, at Bohemia during Edmonton Pride. The venue was so small that six performers had to share a six-foot-square single washroom for a change room. When they added everyone’s costumes and props, it didn’t leave a whole lot of room for changing. But there on a small, barely raised stage, they showcased four sets of drag characters: Lesbian Butch Dyke and Nerdy Femme; White-Stuffy-Femme and Proper-White-Gent; Randy and Dennis, two white trash boys in love; and their queer faggy unicorns. After a photoshoot with Shirley Tse featuring the latter three character sets, Ponyboi published “Drag Kinging with Ben & Pony,” a photo essay in a special issue of *alt.theatre: Cultural Diversity and the Stage, Gender & Theatre at the Margins* (Meyer, 2013). That fall, two of their performance pieces were accepted into the 14<sup>th</sup> annual (and last) International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE) in Cleveland, Ohio, United States, where they performed on the main stage, and attended workshops and other performances with other practitioners, performers, and scholars (Images 7 & 8). That same year, Ben & Pony were also invited to perform and discuss their drag for a University of Alberta professor and former Beef king, Melisa Brittain’s late Twentieth Century Canadian literature course, *Queerly Canadian*. Unlike Muff E. Ohso’s response to performing in university contexts, Ben & Pony welcomed the opportunity to recruit.

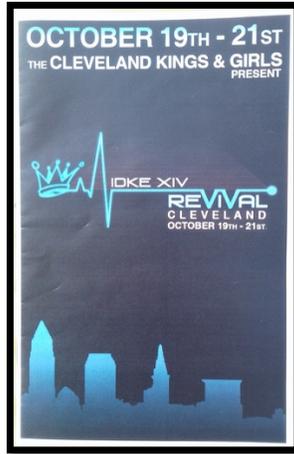


Image 7: IDKE XIV Program, 2012

	<p><b>Ponyboi &amp; Ben Sover</b>          Ponyboi as White-Stuffy-Femme &amp;          Ben Sover as Proper-White-Gentleman</p>
	<p><b>Colorado Collective</b>          Gavin Danger, Doctor Vegas, Matt McGraw, Jasper Nova, Bangus and Boy Fancy comprise this Colorado Collective. These queer performers are representing the Rocky Mountains at IDKE 14 and will dazzle you with their skills on and off of the stage this year! Hailing from Boulder, Bangus is in a group named Rocky Mountain Oysters. Gavin Danger has been collaborating on the scene of Denver under Dangerous Productions, La Galla Queer Performance Collective (LGQPC), Colorado Kingz Collective as well as a plethora of other joint efforts and solo gigs. Doctor Vegas and Jasper Nova are founding members of LGQPC and perform under this umbrella as well as other side projects. Boy Fancy and Matt McGraw are free agents so to speak and have performed with LGQPC and with other local troupes and groups throughout the Denver Metro area.</p>

Image 8: Ben and Pony in IDKE Program

## Gender, Movement, and Performance Workshop: 2013

After their experiences in Cleveland as Ben & Pony, they combined their talents and knowledge and secured funding from Alberta Public Research Interest Group (APIRG) to put on a three-month Gender, Movement, and Performance (GMP) Workshop in the winter of 2013. Through this workshop, the two came together to try to create a safe and accessible space for undergraduate queer people and other queer community members to explore gender, power, identity, oppression, race, ability, and experience through drag kinging and other mediums of visual and performance art and writing. In part, the workshop was about creating art in response to gender-based oppression. Mixing theatre games, critical discussions, and community outings to Garneau Pub, the workshop eventually became more focused on drag kinging; from there, they began exploring drag king history and experimenting with the ins and outs of facial hair, costuming, packing, name-changing, bodily comportment, etc.

The GMP workshop culminated in two public group performances. Eight of the original 11 workshop participants performed their debut, “Soul of a Man” at the Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Conference in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Alberta.<sup>66</sup> Not long after, they performed this piece and won third prize at the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Alberta OUTreach drag show/competition in March 2013 at the Pawn Shop nightclub on Whyte Avenue, which has since closed

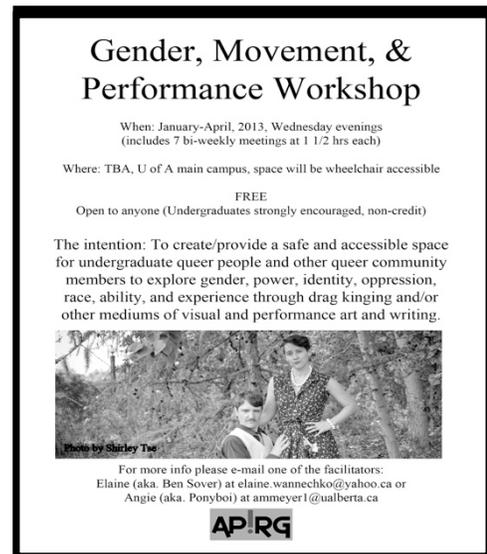


Image 9: GMP Workshop Flyer

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<sup>66</sup> “Soul of a Man”: [https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/avalon:21519](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/avalon:21519).

down. OUTreach drag shows draw hundreds of people, so the size of the event was reportedly exhilarating for a group of mostly first-time performers, especially those kings who wanted to overcome stage fright. As Niles Jupiter says, “part of the reason that I wanted to do drag was just to have the opportunity to do [a] performance so that . . . so you know, I wouldn’t shit myself when I was on stage.” From the seeds of this workshop and performances grew the next drag king troupe in Edmonton’s drag king legacy, Queer Royale.



**Image 10: Manny NutBush at Garneau Pub,  
Edmonton, Alberta, 2013**



**Image 11: GMP Workshop: Niles Jupiter, Ponyboi, & Johnny Hash, 2013**



Image 12: GMP Workshop: Allen the Makeup Guy, 2013



Image 13: Niles Jupiter at Garneau Pub, Edmonton, 2013



**Image 14: GMP Workshop: Ponyboi & Bushwhackin' AI, 2013**



**Image 15: GMP Workshop: Bushwhackin' AI & Mac U. More, 2013**

## Queer Royale 2013–2016

After the two debut performances, the spirit of the workshop continued to thrive for the next few years. After the group let go of “Edmonton Packers” as a potential group name, they embraced Queer Royale as a more gender-inclusive name (i.e., they weren’t all packing, and wanted to make space for femmes to be part of their troupe). From interviewee accounts, the workshopping on drag, queerness, safe spaces, race, and gender were fundamental to the group’s dynamics and politics, and all these experiences flowed into their next endeavour. Building on previous generations of drag kings in Edmonton, they decided to put on a show, and they worked as a group to decide what that might look like. According to their flyers (e.g., “Call-Out for Participants”), they wanted to provide a space for queer art and to create, as best they could, a physically and culturally accessible space and to create/provide a safe(r) space specifically for survivors, introverts, non-binary and transpeople, People of Colour, and sober people (Appendix I). This initiative felt particularly important within the queer community because not all gay bars in Edmonton, for example, are wheelchair accessible or consent- and survivor-oriented spaces.

Queer Royale engaged in a number of practices to work towards these goals for their first show, *Queersummer Night’s Dream (QSND)*. For example, they hired ASL interpreters; made the bathrooms gender-neutral with signage; measured doorways and aisles for wheelchair widths; laid glow-in-the-dark tape to help keep aisles clear; included “vibe watcher” volunteers for people who needed someone to talk to; pre-screened song choices for oppressive lyrics and gave feedback as needed; included content warnings for pieces with strong emotional content (e.g., suicide, abuse); reserved accessible seating for wheelchair users; created safe(r) space guidelines based on respect and consent; worked closely with the MC to help create an anti-oppressive space; provided free bus tickets for those who needed them; had a sliding-scale entrance fee to the show; secured funding so all artists and technicians would be paid artist fees; and provided eight weeks of free practice/rehearsal space prior to show.

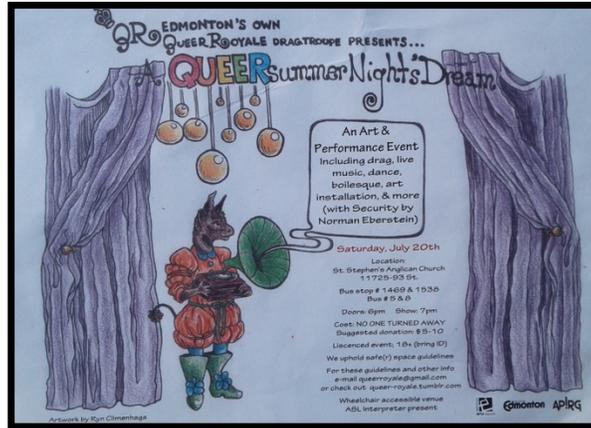


Image 16: Event Flyer for *Queersummer Night's Dream*, Artwork by Ryn Climenhaga

Their first show, *Queersummer Night's Dream Performance and Art Event*, was a large community organizing feat and a showcase of local performing talents. The multicolored backdrop to the stage alone took seven hours! As modeled after *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, the theme of the evening was about dream-states, unexpected couplings, trickery, and transformations. On a hot (for Edmonton) summer night on July 20, 2013, the performance event came to fruition and included over 20 contributing artists, most of whom were non-binary, women, and/or queer. The evening featured live music, dramatic readings, drag kinging, dance, comedy, visual art, poetry, and boylesque. Ben Sover performed a dramatic reading in collaboration with a community member; Al and Ponyboi performed a vaudeville/Fosse-style dance number to live original music by Jessica Denise;<sup>67</sup> Right Gut (Lindsay Eales, Lascaux Proxy, and Ponyboi) performed an improvised dance and movement piece with visual projections by Patrick Arès-Pilon and original music by Lascaux Proxy; and Ben Sover and Ponyboi performed a hot boylesque number, “Daddy’s Boi,” featuring no tits and a cock tassel. Drag queen Monae Murkin (a.k.a. Mac U. More) made her

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<sup>67</sup> “Cuckoo”: [https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/avalon:21513](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/avalon:21513)

debut that evening, organizing volunteers and looking flawless. Johnny Hash, Niles Jupiter, Colin Ize, and Cherry Bomb also dragged it up for the event as organizers and volunteers. Queer Royale also had a drag king “security guard,” Norman, who performed in the space. Nikki Shaffeeullah was the MC for the show; a few hours before the show, she wrote all her words, jokes, and introductions in Shakespeare-esque rhymes. She also put on an intermission show when she invited a fellow audience member in drag to the stage to teach her Bollywood dance moves.



**Image 17: AI at QSND, 2013**



**Image 18: Ben Sover & Community Member at QSND, 2013**



**Image 19: Bollywood Lesson with MC Nikki Shaffeeullah & Aliya Jamal**



**Image 20: Monae Murkin at QSND, 2013**



**Image 21: “Cuckoo” with Al and Ponyboi at QSND, 2013**



**Image 22: Finale - QSND, 2013**

After their first show, Queer Royale continued to organize and perform in Edmonton. In addition to winning second prize in the OUTreach drag show and competition in 2014 with their breakthrough workout routine, “Fab ‘n Fruity Fitness,” Queer Royale members also performed in various fundraisers and put on workshops for queer youth in Edmonton. During this time, Queer Royale started to work toward articulating who they were and what they believed in as a troupe, and collectively created their Queer Royale Vision and Mandate (Appendix J)



Image 23: Queer Royale's Mac. U. More, Miss Pussy Mae Schmell (Miss PMS),  
& Al Wang, 2014, collage by Mac U. More





Image 25: “Thrift Shop” — Mac U. More & Miss PMS, Hooligan’s Pub, Edmonton, AB, 2014



Image 26: Queer Royale’s Colin Ize, Niles Jupiter, Ben Sover, & Ponyboi, Photo by Shirl Tse

On November 1, 2014, they put on their second large-scale show, *Queer Halo's Eve (QHE)*,<sup>68</sup> at Latitude 53. The event featured over 20 contributing local artists, most of whom were queer and/or female artists, both emerging and professional; the show featured clown, dance, a cappella, drag, boilesque, improvisational comedy, and poetry. Queer Royale contributed several performances for this event, including a boilesque number, “I’m Mine” by Ponyboi with guest submissive, Ben Sover; a whimsical clown hoop performance by Niles Jupiter and Colin Ize; an improvisational drag king comedy lip-synch by Ben Sover and Vancouver drag king, Chris Topper; an emotional drag ballad remembering our fallen queers by Mademois’ Al; and closing out the show, Mademois’ Al and her sexy backup dancers with a dark goth number, featuring Queer Royale’s Ben Sover and Ponyboi and two other community performers.

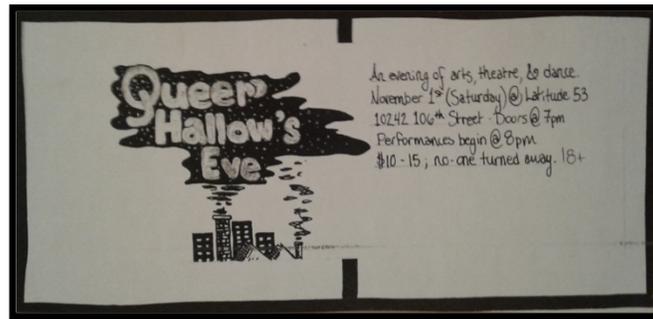


Image 27: QHE Event Handbill, Artwork by Alex Felicitas

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<sup>68</sup> Vue Weekly on Queer Royale and *Queersummer Night's Dream* and *Queer Hallow's Eve*.

<http://www.vueweekly.com/queer-hallows-eve-queer-royales-latest-project-cabaret-fun/>.



Image 28: QHE Event Handbill, Artwork by Alex Felicitas

QHE packed a full house that night. In fact, though the performance was well-received, there were so many people in the space that the aisles became too crowded, and people who may have wanted to leave

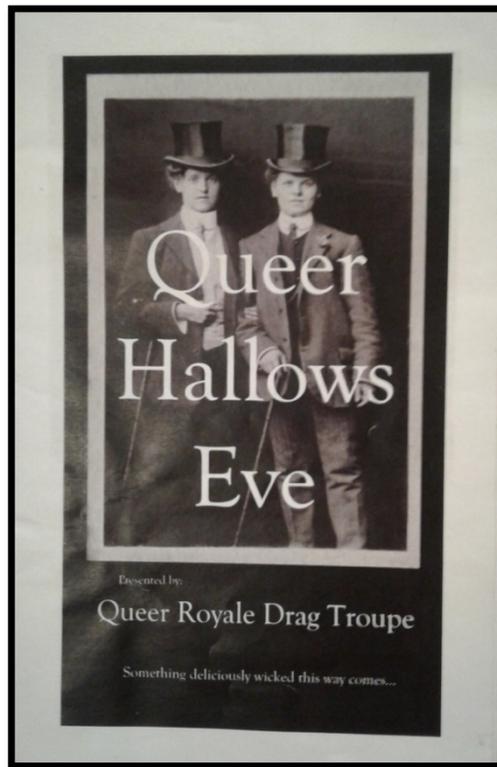


Image 29: QHE Event Program, designed by  
Alex Felicitas

could not. Part of Queer Royale’s process, which was quite emotionally heavy according to members of the troupe, involved debriefing about these kinds of accessibility and safety issues. As another example of

debriefing, they had in-depth discussions around the censorship of art and safety because one person in the audience felt triggered by a particular drag piece that re-enacted domestic partner violence cycles of abuse. There were conflicting opinions within the group as to what steps they might take in the future around such issues.



**Image 30: QHE Merchandise Table, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions**



**Image 31: Niles Jupiter backstage at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions**



Image 32: Haute Curry at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions



Image 33: "A B C ZZZ" by House of DAM, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions



Image 34: Chris Topper at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions



Image 35: "Cirkustalt" by Niles Jupiter & Colin Ize at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions



Image 36: “Hider, Midnight Rider” at QHE by Mademois’ Al with Backup Dancers, photo by Lazy

Kitten Productions



**Image 37: Hider, “Midnight Rider” at QHE by Mademois’ Al with Backup Dancers, photo by Lazy**

#### **Kitten Productions**

Queer Royale continued the tradition of previous Edmontonian drag king troupes by engaging in feminist politics in their performance practices and community organizing feats. And, like the Alberta Beef, they began moving toward intersectional and anti-oppressive politics (and for some, postcolonial), as well as questioning and critiquing the tropes and traditions of drag kinging itself. Drag, for most Queer Royale kings, became both a very personal journey toward selfhood and expanding artistry as well as a means of participating in social justice. Al comments on this aspect:

I feel like to me that term [artist] and that role is completely intertwined and necessarily intertwined with actually doing good work in the world. So, for me, drag is definitely part of that. I think specifically in the context of how QR happened and what values we put in place and focused on. It was about addressing gender issues whether that’s like the “binary” issue, trans issues, patriarchy, you know, whatever. It just felt like it definitely fit within that social justice piece.

Many of QR’s kings already considered themselves artists and they articulate drag’s role in their life as an extension of their artistic/creative practice. Drag kinging, within their explicitly anti-oppressive context, was

also a way to safely explore and experiment with different gender presentations, to reflect on their relationships with masculinity, and to discover different parts of themselves.

After Queer Royale's second large-scale performance event, several members of the troupe began to feel their model of community organizing and performing was no longer sustainable. They had undoubtedly evolved into a community organization group just as much as they had sharpened their performance skills. The amount of emotional labour and physical energy that goes into putting on such large-scale community events, in addition to performing multiple numbers in shows, became overwhelming for many, and the troupe as a whole decided to take a break from organizing. They agreed to continue to perform in one-off pieces where there were opportunities to do so. Since that time, the troupe has performed a few times together in gay bars, and some kings have ventured into solo performance.

## **Interlude One — Ponyboi’s Boilesque: Auto-Ethnographic Performance**

This interlude outlines my boilesque performances under the stage name, Ponyboi. Part of my drag developed into what I call boilesque performance, which combines features from both drag kinging and burlesque performative genres. The strip-tease is sometimes critiqued within the drag king genre as a cop-out because it’s supposedly more difficult to maintain a character than to take off your clothes, but for me, my body was part of the medium with which I wanted to express my political and artistic message. Unpacking my body, so to speak, in front of an audience became a research method that I used to investigate aspects of queer performative space as well as to experiment with my own gender transformation. Methodologically, this is what I referred to in Chapter Two as “practice as research in performance” (or PARIP). Both my boilesque pieces play with aspects of the burlesque form but attempt to queer and gender-fuck traditional burlesque (and even some neo-burlesque) by re-imagining the breast-reveal and the heterosexual male gaze.

In this interlude, I first provide a brief background of the burlesque performance genre and its connections to drag kinging. I then present two performance examples: “Daddy’s Boi” and “I’m Mine.” For each of these examples, I document the performances through photographs, video, and descriptive overviews which include location, props, music, lighting, and other dramaturgical choices. Each of these performance pieces will be taken up in Chapters Five and Six as examples of political gender-fuck drag that intentionally disrupt the natural attitude.

### **Burlesque Background**

Coming to North America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, burlesque performance began as a “supremely parodic form that blended feminine sexual display with critical social commentary” (Butler, 2014, p. 44; Dundson, 2014; Nally, 2009). The strip did not actually emerge as part of the genre until the 1920s (Butler, 2014). Lydia Thompson and her female burlesque troupe, the British Blondes, were one of the first troupes to perform in America, making their debut in New York in 1868 (Butler, 2014; Nally, 2009). The Blondes’

burlesque performances, unlike what would later be called the “golden age” of burlesque, were severely subversive and unconventional. Alexis Butler (2014) writes that

Performing in cross-dress in a stage genre that had originally been performed by men, the burlesque bodies of *The British Blondes* were highly self-aware, physically voluptuous and a challenge to the very notion of textual containment through the use of pun, parody, and a distorted classical narrative. Comical grotesquery, defined by its disruptions of class and gender hierarchies, embodied as it was in an aesthetic of pleasure and diversity, called into question all that constituted the stability of the culturally elitist identity—in particular the nineteenth-century construct of the ‘True Woman.’ (p. 45)

Similar to some present-day drag king performances, the Blondes’ “quasi-cross dress both underlined and hyperbolized their female, anti-feminine sexuality and mocked masculine swagger and authority simultaneously” (Butler, 2014, p. 45).

These early burlesque performances contrast greatly with what developed post-Lydia Thompson’s burlesque. As burlesque audiences became predominantly male, the genre evolved into performances that aimed to please their audiences rather than to provoke them; the sexy but insubordinate gender-bending female was for the most part squashed (Butler, 2014, p. 46). Moreover, we saw the gradual decline in the use of the central dramaturgical device of burlesque, “inversion,” which, according to cultural historian Robert C. Allen, “manifest[s] as insubordination and subversion of mainstream propriety, historically propagating much uneasiness and resulting in the firm entrenchment of the genre within ‘low’ culture” (as cited in Butler, 2014, p. 45). By the 1930’s, “the striptease became *the* defining element of burlesque,” and by the 1940s and 50s, burlesque eventually “made its way out of the working-class theatre and into the (almost) mainstream of the night club” (*emphasis original*, p. 46). This kind of burlesque became what is known as the golden age of burlesque, which was virtually void of critical social commentary and drew primarily from mainstream beauty ideals. When neo-burlesque emerged in the 1990s, many contemporary burlesque performers, such as Dita Von Teese, sought to (and continue to) embody the non-critical aesthetic of the golden age, while others such as the Toronto collective, the Scandelles; and the Garter Girls in Calgary, pull more from the spirit of the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century burlesque of the *British Blondes* (Butler, 2014, p. 45; Dunsdon, 2014). My boilesque

performances also build on the tradition of the British Blondes by providing critical social commentary in addition to sex appeal.

### **Daddy's Boi**

Video Link: [https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/avalon:21527](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/avalon:21527) at *Queersummer Night's Dream*, Edmonton, AB, July 20, 2013 (first performance).

“Daddy’s Boi” features Ben Sover as Daddy and Ponyboi as the power-bottom boi. The piece begins with Ben Sover seated in a chair while Ponyboi stands a few feet beside him behind two large burlesque feather fans; one or two people hold the fans and pulsate them to the rhythm as the music fades in. The music is slow and seductive: Bonnie Lee’s version of “My Man Rocks Me.” Although Bonnie Lee recorded the song in the 1960s, the vocals and style are reminiscent of 1930s blues and jazz. The intro to the song was looped to extend the song by 30 seconds, making the performance version three minutes and 24 seconds. The feather fans cover Ponyboi’s body from the knee up so only a tapping foot can initially be seen until the fans are slowly opened to reveal Ponyboi facing the audience striking a pose and beginning to move. Ponyboi wears black slacks, a black button-down collared long-sleeve shirt (tucked in), a black leather belt, a black tie with white stars on it, and a black leather daddy-boi hat turned backwards. He dons a small black soul patch on his chin, bright red lipstick, mascara, and bare feet. His hair is shaved short except for a single curl poking through the front of the hat. Ben Sover wears extremely tight, bright-red jeans with black designs on them, a black short sleeve button down shirt tucked in, and a black leather belt. He sports thick, clunky, tall black leather lace-up boots and a thick black leather bracelet. His hair is short on top and shaved on the sides, and he wears a thick, light-brown moustache. He packs an impressive sock cock that can’t be missed.

As the feather fans reveal Ponyboi, the dance and striptease begin for both Ben Sover and the audience. Ben Sover watches Ponyboi intently and never leaves his chair. He taps his foot authoritatively, yet he is also yielding. There is no struggle for power during the performance. Ponyboi is always in control of Daddy’s attention, whose gaze stays fixed on Ponyboi and whose head often bows in submission. Ponyboi

dances almost to the one-minute mark before he begins to seductively remove his tie, which he drops in front of Ben Sover who slowly retrieves it. As the dance continues, Ponyboi dances off their shirt by pulling apart custom-sewn snap buttons to reveal a set of rainbow suspenders underneath his shirt. He again drops the shirt in front of Daddy to pick up as he turns around to slowly dance off his suspenders with his back to the audience. As the suspenders come off, his naked back is revealed, where the words “Daddy’s Boi” are written in black body paint. When he dances back to face the audience, there is no titty reveal as Ponyboi’s areolas and nipples are taped over unimpressively with black electrical tape. Facing the audience and working toward the third and final reveal, Ponyboi dances his belt open, his zipper down, and his pants drop to reveal a black and red cock tassel swinging from a pair of grey men’s underwear. Ponyboi continues to dance, making a few pelvic circles that swing the cock tassel around as the song and performance comes to an end.

We performed this piece four times in four different contexts: for an enthusiastic queer crowd at a variety show in a small, hot, dimly lit, and tightly packed church recreation room (*Queersummer Night’s Dream* put on by Queer Royale); for a sober and mostly straight crowd at a belly dance Halloween show in a large and cold Alberta Avenue community hall (brrr!); for a “family-friendly” fundraiser in a well-lit dance studio (a bit awkward); and finally, my favourite, for an already-voyeuristic audience in a warm, dimly-lit art gallery for a local feminist porn film festival put on by a fellow drag king and close friends. This last performance at the festival was particularly exhilarating because the space allowed for the autoeroticism of this piece and the power dynamics between the characters to reach their full potential. This performance featured more improvisation and more physical touch interaction between Ponyboi and Daddy; Ponyboi, for example, added a grinding dance on Daddy while he was seated in the chair. We also integrated a collar and leash at the end after the strip tease that helped Ben’s submission to be much more apparent as he was instructed to kneel, submit, and pick up all Ponyboi’s clothes before we exited the stage. All performances took place in Edmonton, Alberta.



Image 38: “Daddy’s Boi” — *Spooktacular*, Alberta Ave Community Hall, Edmonton, AB, 2013,

photo by Kazoo Production



Image 39: “Daddy’s Boi” — *Spooktacular*, Alberta Avenue Community Hall, Edmonton, AB, 2013,

photo by Kazoo Production



Image 40: "Daddy's Boy" — *Spooktacular*, Alberta Avenue Community Hall, Edmonton, AB, 2013,

photo by Kazoo Production

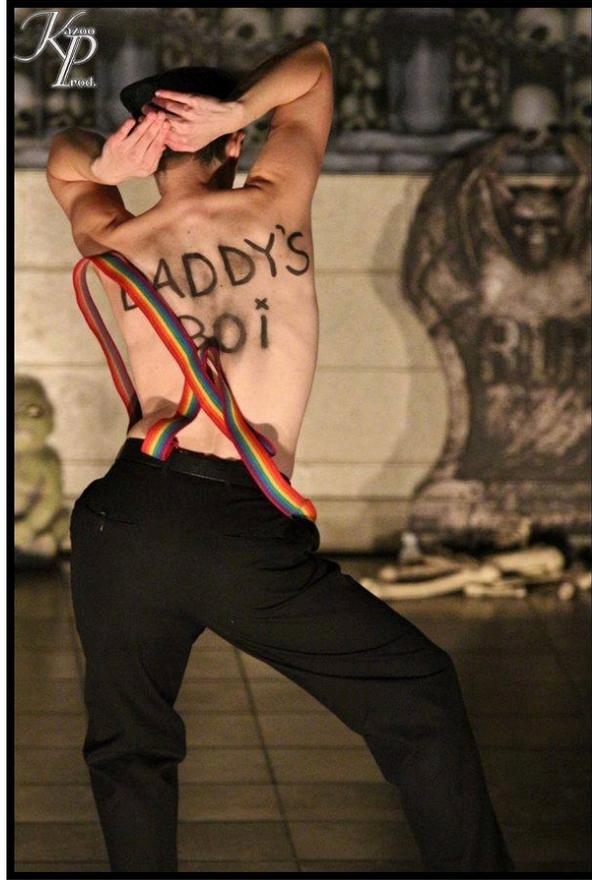


Image 41: “Daddy’s Boi” — *Spooktacular*, Alberta Avenue Community Hall, Edmonton, AB, 2013,

photo by Kazoo Production



Image 42: “Daddy’s Boi” — *Spooktacular*, Alberta Avenue Community Hall, Edmonton, AB, 2013,  
photo by Kazoo Production

### “I’m Mine”

Video Link: [https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/avalon:21529](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/avalon:21529) at *Queer Hallow’s Eve* at Latitude 54, Edmonton, AB, November 1, 2014.

“I’m Mine” features Ponyboi as the lead creator/choreographer/performer/dancer and Ben Sover as the guest submissive/witness. The set includes a full-length, stand-up oval wooden antique mirror that is covered by a vibrant red, soft and sheer piece of fabric with lacy skull patterns; a short wooden bookcase that stands less than half the height of the mirror holding two shelves of books; and a single white candle in an English brass candlestick, and a lighter on top of the bookcase. The two pieces of furniture face the audience, slightly angled inward and sitting about six feet apart. The piece begins with Ponyboi and Ben Sover entering the stage to the slow and sultry looped clip of “Stalkin” by Duane Eddy and the Rebels (1958). Ben Sover is wearing a black leather studded collar attached to a leash controlled by Ponyboi. Ponyboi leads Ben Sover behind him onto the stage. Ponyboi wears black dress pants, a tucked-in, white short-sleeve button-down shirt with embroidered patterns, a black belt, a plain black jacket with the collar popped, black suspenders

with skulls on them, a black leather zipper tie, and a fedora-style black hat with a white and black skull-image trim. He wears a thin black moustache and a small soul patch on his chin. Ben Sover wears black jeans and a black button-down short-sleeve shirt tucked in with a black leather belt. His hair is shaved on the sides but long on top and pulled back into a half ponytail. They both wear glasses and are barefoot.

Ponyboi leads Ben Sover onto the stage and directs him to kneel by pointing his finger downward. Ben Sover looks attentively at Ponyboi and obeys. Once Ben Sover has knelt, Ponyboi directs him to hold his own leash while he takes off his jacket. The looped track begins to fade as Ponyboi hands his jacket to Ben Sover and walks toward the bookcase. By the time Ponyboi picks a book from the shelf, the music has faded into silence. He opens the book as if looking for a particular spell; once he finds it and reads it, he closes the book and returns it to the shelf. He lights the candle with the lighter and turns to face the mirror; as he does so, the edited and extended Screaming Jay Hawkins (1956) song “I Put a Spell on You” fills the room. Ponyboi’s fingers twiddle with anticipation as he approaches the covered mirror. For the first reveal, Ponyboi moves behind the mirror and undresses it slowly, removing the fabric with his sexual fluttering finger dancing. As he moves to the front of the mirror, he begins to “put a spell” on himself; his dance and striptease are directed toward the mirror, though he moves back and forth between facing the audience and facing the mirror. The audience is witness to the spell he puts on himself and to the liminal relationship with his own body that exists in that performative space. All his attention is directed at himself through touching his body, looking at his body, and engaging with the mirror which acts as another way of looking at his body from the outside. During the striptease, he does not direct the spell or his gaze to the audience, nor does he interact with Ben Sover who only acts as a witness to this part of the ritual. Ponyboi begins his striptease dance by removing his tie, then his suspenders, and then his button-down shirt. For the second reveal, after removing his shirt, Ponyboi turns around to show his bare back with the words “I’m Mine” written in dripping blood. Ponyboi turns around and continues to dance and touch his body in an ecstatic and loving way; he then dances toward the third reveal. He moves toward the mirror, unzips his pants, and lets them fall to the ground as he faces the mirror. Doing so reveals his black and red cock tassel on his grey men’s

underwear. He steps out of his pants and walks to face the audience, though his focus and gaze stays inward. He ends the strip with his hands outstretched to the sky as the last “You’re Mine!” belts out. He gently pulls on his cock tassel as the song fades out. In silence, Ponyboi walks to Ben Sover, picks up his leash and leads him to the bookcase. Ben Sover carefully picks up the lit candle and holds it with two hands in front of him; as he does this, the same looped clip of “Stalkin” fades into full volume as Ben follows Ponyboi, and they both exit the stage. The lights and music fade out.



**Image 43: “I’m Mine” – Ponyboi at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions**



Image 44: "I'm Mine" – Ponyboi at QHE, photo by Lazy Kitten Productions

## Chapter Five — Communicating Gender: Drag Kings, Audience, and Liminal Space

We joke in DBT [Disposable Boy Toys] about drag being the gateway drug for gender regardless of what that gender is. (Summer's Eve as cited in Shapiro, 2007, p. 259)

In order to live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create—by structural means—spaces and times in the calendar, or in the cultural cycles of their most cherished groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action. These liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jurial models that control the centres of a society's ongoing life. (Turner, 1969, p. vii)

The Drag Journal (Appendix A) provides a window to research participants' experiences of doing drag and its role in their lives, while my drag practice (Interludes One & Two) illustrates several examples of how drag can be used as a political tool. In this chapter, I take up the theorists Bettcher (2007), Turner (1969, 1982a), and Muñoz (1999) to analyze these stories, performances, and experiences.

I argue that for these interviewees, within the socially conservative context of Alberta, Canada, drag king performances functioned as *liminal* spaces. Turner (1969) describes these spaces as *anti-structure*, or outlets for transgression outside of quotidian statuses and roles. Within liminal spaces, we are safely allowed to break taboos and experiment with cultural paraphernalia; they are spaces of magic, threshold, and transition where play and symbolic rituals combined with community support can lead to transformative life experiences. In this chapter, I specifically discuss the produced effects of this community support (i.e., constituency audiences) within the framework of liminal drag performance. First, I argue that constituency audiences and the performative framework of drag creates an atmosphere of safety and support for gender experimentation, and ultimately a space for gender validation. Because drag king audiences typically support the subversion of gender and sexual normativity which occurs in drag king performance, the normative communicative functions of gender have the potential to be re-imagined. I explore this potential reimagining and the implications of an alternative communicative function of gender for trans and non-binary performers and communities. Second, I examine how constituency audiences affect the political impact of drag kinging; despite that many Edmonton kings use drag as an outlet for political expression, drag's provocation potential

and its effectiveness as a political tool is called into question when we consider the nature of king audiences. Using examples of Edmonton drag king performance, I work through the tensions between kinging's political usefulness and the limitations of performing to audiences already committed to the subversion of normative gender.

Although I argue that drag kinging provides opportunities for transformative experiences and political self-expression, I also argue that we must be careful not to over-value the liberating quality of such a practice; as a liminal practice, actions, and parameters of the form can become circumscribed and conformist. And to be sure, there is nothing *inherently* radical about drag kinging. More broadly, as a performance practice, kinging can be constricting because rules inevitably form as the genre evolves, and therefore, we can see a normalizing and codifying effect. Kinging, as both a liminal and a performance practice, can become rule-oriented and conformist, thus limiting its radical political potential; this is the paradox of theatre/performance within which these Albertan kings practice.

### **Temporary Suspension of Quotidian Status and the Natural Attitude**

In this section, I demonstrate the temporary suspension of quotidian status for Albertan drag kings and how the *natural attitude* supports violence against gender non-conformity. As discussed in Chapter Three, socio-political discourse has consistently relegated lgbttq+ people to outsider status. However, everyday social statuses and roles are temporarily put on hold in liminal spaces (Turner, 1982a, p. 44). In the liminal spaces of drag kinging, including rehearsals, stage performances, and post-performance mingling, the everyday statuses of interviewees are temporarily suspended; they are no longer necessarily “women,” “men,” “freaks,” “invisible,” or “morally depraved deviants.”

Liminality is a temporary setting of “social limbo” where subversive, creative, and ludic activities take place; in these spaces, people play with familiar and normative elements of culture, turn them on their head, distort reality, critique norms, and sometimes create new meanings. Liminality stems from “limen,” meaning “threshold” in Latin, or as Turner describes, “an intervening phase of transition” (1982a, p. 24). The Oxford

Dictionary defines liminal as 1) relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process and 2) occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold (*English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, n.d.). Turner (1982a), describes liminality as a time of total *potentiality* where

factors or elements of culture may be recombined in numerous, often grotesque ways, grotesque because they are arrayed in terms of possible or fantasied rather than experienced combinations – thus a monster disguise may combine human, animal, and vegetable features in an ‘unnatural’ way, while the same features may be differently, but equally ‘unnaturally’ combined in a painting or described in a tale. In other words, in liminality people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements. (p. 27)

Like ritual, drag king performance is the cultural manifestation of our drive to be temporarily free of social structures and limitations, and allows us to question and critique our roles and statuses within this structure.

Through drag, participants are given the opportunity to play and experiment with new statuses, embodiments, roles, and identities that in their everyday worlds remained unseen, undervalued, taboo, or even unknown to them. Some sought to deconstruct identity itself. In drag, they had the freedom to transcend structural and personal limitations of being assigned female at birth and the potential sexism, harassment, transphobia, dysphoria, and institutional oppression attendant on such an assignment. Although gender and sexuality policing do exist to varying degrees within gay and queer subcultures, these interviewees felt temporarily free from these normative imperatives experienced in their everyday lives.

Some kings engaged with drag in order to experiment with identity as performance on a theoretical level.

I liked the idea of gender as performance; I was really big into postmodern feminism, and what would pave the way for what is now called intersectional feminism. We didn’t have that as a term at the time, but bringing all these things together and realizing that a lot of identity is cast onto us, more than what we embody as this sort of, natural essential being. So, I was really exploring that at the time: identity as a construction. And so, performing masculinity was a way of deconstructing it. (Jack Strap)

For Jack, any quotidian gender status could be suspended because they’re all socially constructed features of our world. As a liminal space, drag gave them the opportunity to experiment with those theoretical ideas.

For most drag kings, however, the suspension of everyday status was more than a theoretical experiment; it was a gateway to self-expression and self-discovery that contrasted greatly with their everyday worlds.

I've never been beaten up or anything because of my gender presentation. But that doesn't mean that there's not also underlying subtleties in which it's rendered invisible, not talked about, or shunned or stigmatized in other ways . . . So it's been fun, creative, and I think, for me as I said at the end of my twenties, it was a way to just kind of burst open some of my own . . . I don't know if it's internalized homophobia, or repression of some versions of masculinity. To just kind of say, here's a space for that part of me to just kind of go out and play with it and have fun with it. (Lil' Mack)

This quote shows how Lil' Mack experienced invisibility attached to their everyday statuses of being “in between categories,” being a masculine person assigned female at birth, and being a queer person (i.e., shame or internalized homophobia). Similarly, Mac. U. More, a non-binary person, talked about experiencing transphobia:

It's as small as the fear that gets instilled in me when I'm trying to explain to people and I tell them what my name is. And their response is, “oh, that's interesting, I've never met a girl with a boy's name like that before,” and then trying to explain to them that I'm not a girl, and their response to that is a little bit terrifying because people get very confused. . . . I've quit jobs recently in the last six months because they refused to use the name that I identify with, which is kind of like a subtle expression of transphobia in my mind. [When I do drag] I'm being validated for being a good performer, but also this expression of gender performance is something that gets validated.

Mac's story is primarily about the experiences of being mis-gendered, a common microaggression experienced by non-binary and transpeople; this kind of microaggression occurs in part because the general public doesn't recognize genders outside of man or woman. As Mac describes their experiences of “quitting jobs” and using words like “fear” and “terrifying” when someone simply asks them their name, we can start to understand how such microaggressions might negatively affect mental health and one's ability to thrive and flourish. This starkly contrasts with the validation they feel with their drag gender presentation, demonstrating its potential to suspend what they might experience in their everyday world as it relates to gender status.

Much of these everyday microaggressions result from normative assumptions about gender, sex, and sexuality that explicitly demonstrate how the natural attitude supports violence against gender non-conformity.

At least now, because I've sort of had the opportunity to explore it through drag, gender questioning seems to be more accurate because like I said, I don't really feel like either female or male. I have breasts but that doesn't necessarily mean that makes me feel like I'm female. It's just a part of my body that's there, and I like the fact that doing drag I can alter it. I don't struggle with dysphoria in the sense that, you know, I have to bind all the time. But at the same time, there's definitely times where I don't feel comfortable having a female body, and it's because, you know, people yell out of their cars at you, and it's just kind of like, it just makes me feel weird, a) because it's gross, and b) because it's like, why are you shouting at me? I don't feel like that [female]. (Niles Jupiter)

Here we see how secondary sex characteristics (e.g. breasts) affect how kings experience their everyday worlds in relation to being misgendered as female. Drag, for Niles, offered a place to suspend the notion that breasts made them irrevocably and only female. What makes this discourse possible is the natural attitude, or mainstream society's positions toward sex and gender in Canada and United States. Such an attitude assumes the invariance of sex and relies on genital status to determine one's so-called true sex and corresponding gender (Bettcher, 2007, p. 48). Johnny Hash, a cisgender female, also talks about breasts in terms of their experiences of discrimination as well as some of the political debates around toplessness within the lgbttq+ community:

I think a lot of weight is given to breasts, and it's kind of silly. . . . Breasts are not seen the same as other pectoral muscles and nipples, and to me they're really no different than a foot or a hand, they're just a body part. And somebody having breasts shouldn't impact how we see their gender expression or gender identity. It's just a body part, like a hairstyle, in my opinion. And I've only experienced a minor part of sexualization of breasts or breast discrimination, because I breastfeed. And not only do I breastfeed babies, but I breastfeed children. And so when I whip a breast out in public, occasionally, I'll receive some negative comments from strangers. And I think it's absurd. Because it's like, if you're attracted to what I'm doing, or if you're worried other people are attracted, you've got problems. And if you're worried about someone participating in a Pride march who identifies as male and you don't think they have the right to be topless as well, there's something wrong with your politics. And you need to examine that.

Johnny Hash's and Niles Jupiter's stories as well as Phoenix's journal entries (Appendix A) highlight the sexualization and policing of breasts and the fact that, for the general public, having or not having breasts is a defining feature of gender identity. Johnny Hash talks further about nudity in Pride marches and the difficulty that non-operative (top surgery) trans and non-binary people might face even within lgbttq+ communities.

I feel that, especially drag kinging, brings a lot of voice and value to transmasculine people. . . . I think transmasculine people have the short end of the stick. Because maybe you can't afford surgery, maybe you don't want surgery, having breasts doesn't mean that you don't identify as male, or you can't be seen as male. And I think that drag kinging really exposes that mindset. And so it's

unfortunate if all drag is censored and seen as not positive. But again, I don't feel I have really a right to [say because] I'm not a trans person and my voice shouldn't really matter.

Drag kings' reflections on being in drag in public spaces also reveal some connection to trans experiences. Several kings, for example, voiced fears of "being discovered" when reflecting on being in drag and/or passing as cis-male in public spaces.

I wish I would have gone out more and played with that whole idea of how you'd be perceived if you are perceived as male, but it was also a safety factor. . . . Great if you can pull it off and you can be perceived that way, but what if halfway through it, something doesn't go [well]. . . . I know one thing we talked about but we never got over the whole safety factor of it, was we really wanted to go dressed as a troupe to the rodeo, but we were also like. . . . (sound of hesitation, pull in of air) we just don't know. So, we didn't do it . . . because we were just a little bit concerned about the safety factor. If you tick off the wrong person and it results in a brawl, and none of us really wanted to put ourselves in that situation. (Randy Packer)

Randy Packer's story shows the fear of being ambiguously gendered in a hypermasculinized space (rodeo)—the fear of violence if people discovered they were not "real" men. The binary sex-gender system, or what Feinberg calls the "pink-blue dogma," supposes "masculine females are trying to look 'like men,' and feminine males are trying to act 'like women'" (Feinberg, 1998, p. 9). What would cowboys do if they found that a "woman" was mocking their manliness or embodying hypermasculinity? It's this fear that kept the Alberta Beef from going on that performative adventure. Mac. U. More talked about similar fears of discovery in public.

[The] other piece of it that I find very terrifying that I said, that while we live in this progressive, lovely and accepting city, I'm more afraid of passing as a cis-dude but then people finding out that I'm not—that's scary! And that's probably another reason why I don't do it out in public. . . . [I'm afraid of] violence, actual physical violence. I have more confidence in being able to protect myself when I'm passing as a cis-woman than when I'm passing as a dude.

This reflection gives us insight into how the natural attitude disallows gender incongruence. Similarly, while performing Proper White Gent out in public in an Edmonton park, Ben Sover felt the fear of "being discovered" (but also not wanting to be read as a cis-man). Temporarily being in drag is not the same struggle as being trans; however, these stories illustrate one way in which the natural attitude enforces genital essentialism and transphobia. All three kings are caught in a double bind whereby they can only be viewed and understood as pretenders or deceivers. As pretenders, they're visible and uncloseted but not recognized

as their gender of choice; and as deceivers, they are invisible, closeted, and at risk of “exposure” or “discovery.” The double bind has “the effect of doubly delegitimizing our own voices by constructing us as both fictitious and morally suspect,” and has been used to justify transphobic violence “on the grounds of deception” (Bettcher, 2007, p. 51). Not all transpeople or non-binary people are concerned with passing as male or female; however, passing itself does have real-world consequences because people often need to know what gender category you fall into. For many people, it’s part of their way of understanding the world around them. And given the natural attitude, there are risks to being openly trans or ambiguously gendered as well as going stealth.

In her article, “Evil deceivers and make-believers: On transphobic violence and the politics of illusion,” Bettcher (2007) examines the stereotype that transgender people are deceivers, and contends that the pervasive but false natural attitude justifies/excuses transphobic violence. To illustrate this point, Bettcher analyzes media and legal discourse around the murder of a 17-year-old transgender girl of color, Gwen Araujo, in 2002 in Newark, California. While at a party in a private home, four men forced Araujo to expose her genitals in a bathroom, after which they “discovered” that she was “really a man.” They then proceeded to beat and strangle her to death, and then buried her 150 miles away. She had apparently had sexual relations with two of the men prior to the night of her death, both of whom had already been discussing Araujo’s gender identity (Bettcher, 2007, p. 44). During the first murder trial, however, two of Araujo’s murderers claimed they reacted based on what came to be known as the “trans panic defence,” arguing that the “discovery” that Araujo was “really a man” was so shocking that it provoked an out-of-control violent response. Despite the fact that Araujo was herself sexually assaulted (subject to forced genital exposure) prior to her violent death, the media discourse surrounding her murder ultimately portrayed her as deceitful, guilty of wrong-doing, and even guilty of rape for not having revealed her genital status prior to engaging in consensual sexual acts (Bettcher, 2007; Calef, 2002; Fernandez, & Kuruvila, 2002; Reiterman, Garrison, & Handley, 2002).

Part of why the natural attitude perpetuates transphobic violence and violence against women is because this worldview understands gender presentation as a way of communicating genital status. The natural attitude presupposes a heteronormative representational relation between gender presentation and the sexed body so that what we present communicates to others what type of genitals we have, what type of genitals we desire, and the degree of our sexual interest. That is, despite what we might present to the outside world it's what's underneath our clothing and between our legs that count as "truth" or "reality" (identity enforcement). In this way, "deployments of gender attributions" often "run contrary to a transperson's own self-identifications" (Bettcher, 2007, p. 47), thereby making it virtually impossible for a transperson or any number of non-binary kinds of folk to self-define.

Similarly, because of deeply-entrenched views about genital essentiality and gender presentation, most people would not recognize Gwen Araujo as a "transgender woman," but rather a "man disguised as a woman" (Bettcher, 2007, p. 54). Bettcher (2007) says further that by issuing statements such as "she was just being herself," transadvocates fail to recognize that Araujo could not have come out "as herself" insofar as that self is denied by the larger cultural contexts in which she lived. Thus, the elimination of strategies like the "trans panic defence" or statements such as "unfair genital disclosure" don't go deep enough in understanding the roots and consequences of transphobic violence, as they leave the foundations for such violence still intact (i.e., Araujo was still seen as a deceiver).<sup>69</sup> Changing those structures that sustain transphobic violence and violence against women means that we understand how this violence is systemic

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<sup>69</sup> Even when laws prohibit the use of these kinds of "panic defences," they are still used in court, as Gayle Salamon (2015) observed in the court proceedings of the murder of Larry King, a gender-transgressive 15-year-old, who was shot and killed in his Oxnard, California junior high school by his 14-year-old classmate Brandon McInerney in 2008.

and part of an institution of oppression, and not solely acts of violent individuals (although these actions are not to be taken lightly). For instance, the men who murdered Gwen Araujo and the men who murdered and raped Brandon Teena in 1993, a young white transman, may have been violent individuals, but it was the broader cultural contexts (i.e., the discourse of deception, sexist stereotypes that naturalize the raping of women, and the seemingly violent need to penalize what is seen as a betrayal of male privilege/patriarchy) that made these acts of violence not only socially acceptable, but also legitimate. They are understood as legitimate because these violent acts have a restorative function; they correct deviance read as an attack on heteronormativity.

Importantly, Bettcher (2007) draws our attention to the analogy between “the role of gender presentation in ‘communicating’ genital status and the role of female gender presentation in ‘communicating’ sexual interest” (p. 56). She also astutely points out the violence to which both transwomen and transmen are vulnerable: either physical violence as a consequence of “deception” for transwomen, or rape for transmen as an “obvious strategy for putting ‘women back in their rightful place,’” a consequence of “discovering” their “true” sex (p. 57). As Bettcher points out, in cases of transphobic violence (for both transwomen and transmen) and violence against women (including cisgender/cissex and transwomen), “the subjectivity of the ‘communicator’ is erased through the imposition of intentions vis-à-vis the fact that the presentation is construed as communicative” (p. 56). However, gender presentation almost always has some kind of communicative or representational function; but these functions can vary across socio-cultural contexts. Even in queer and drag king subcultural contexts, gender presentation has a communicative function. There are perhaps just different rules. These rules, or what we could call reconfigurations of normative cultural codes, are part of creating queer counter-publics or life worlds; they are part of opening spaces for self-definition outside of normative rules (e.g., heteronormativity, breast discrimination, cisgender normativity, sexual harassment, misogyny). In drag king contexts, everyday statuses are temporarily suspended; the natural attitude is not necessarily the way of things; and different sorts of representational relations emerge—different ways of communicating. Bettcher (2007) argues that gender presentation within trans-specific

communities has a different function; gender presentation is no longer about genital status, but rather about how a person wishes to be read and engaged with (p. 59). Although drag and trans-specific contexts are not necessarily synonymous, Bettcher suggests that gender presentation can function in a safer way outside of a heterosexual framework. As I discuss next, it's the particular relationship between the performative frame of drag kinging and its attendant constituency audiences that facilitates experiences of safety, gender validation, and alternative communicative functions of gender.

### **The Role of Constituency Audiences**

Unlike most public spaces, in queer spaces we see a certain degree of safety in transgressing gender boundaries. Perceptions of safety are a result of queer spaces themselves, but also of the particular context of drag kinging because drag, as a performance practice, relies on constituency audiences. As Colin Ize says, they feel “free to dress however I want to dress in drag, which is nice, and [I’m] allowed to be in people’s faces a lot more, when I know that I’m surrounded with people who are making it a safe space, or a safer space.” These kinds of constituency audiences already have a stake in the performance; they have some degree of shared identity, politics, and/or ideology with the performer(s). For example, a king performance as part of a dinner theatre at the West Edmonton Mall would be received very differently than a performance for an audience at a Queer Theatre Festival event. Not surprisingly, constituent and community theatre/performance predominately functions for “exploited, repressed or underprivileged groups in society” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 63) who need an outlet for content and expression not otherwise permitted (either in mainstream theatre or in everyday life). These kinds of complicit relationships necessarily affect the

production/reception process of a performance in a number of ways (Defraeye, 1994); for Alberta drag kinging,<sup>70</sup> this relationship has several important produced effects.

### **Validation and support.**

The performative framework of drag kinging creates a rare site where individuals are trying to make gender signify in a self-conscious way. Contrary to experiences in their everyday worlds, kings perform in front of constituency audiences who support and validate their gender expressions/identities. Interviewees consistently describe drag king audiences as generous and supportive (e.g., cheering, using preferred pronouns, offering explicit praise, etc.) and it's by examining these drag king stories that we can see an important tension between individual agency in terms of gender expression and the broader socio-cultural contexts. Interviewee's stories of gender-based violence in everyday worlds contrast greatly with the following stories of gender validation in drag spaces; this contrast illuminates the need to understand gender as relationally and structurally constituted as well as the limitations of relying solely on individual freedom (i.e., our right to gender expression) for ending gender-based violence.

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<sup>70</sup> The Fake Mustache of Calgary perform monthly at a local bar for a primarily gay/lesbian audience and for Pride events. Similarly, the Alberta Beef performed at shows they organized at Prism, a gay/lesbian bar, and at Pride events. Queer Royale has performed almost exclusively in queer events they have organized themselves or at specifically queer events such as the OUTreach drag competition and Pride shows. Both the Alberta Beef and Queer Royale also performed for University of Alberta feminist/academic audiences, which were notably different in terms of how interviewees perceived their reception. Although feminists are certainly part of what makes up drag king constituency audiences, several interviewees described their performances in these venues as "different" in the sense that they were tamer with less audience participation.

We see the importance of community support in Phoenix's journal (Appendix A) which details the story about Phoenix and a fellow king "ripping their shirts off" and hearing the audience roar. Lil' Mack talks further about drag as a space where their masculinity was "culturally valued," and Muff E. Ohso says he has "always had a very warm reception." When asked what role the audience plays in drag kinging, Ben Sover says, "I think kind of an encouragement, acceptance, reaffirming that acceptance." Devery Bess comments that

drag is generally a queer art form and a space where queers can feel safe, and do what they'd like, and that's every time I've experienced performing in a new venue, all I've received is love. . . . I feel like in drag, people are generally more open to anything, because they are not trying to drag you down. They want to have a safe space, so they want to have a safe space for someone else.

Oliver Heart spoke to how audiences at Dicken's Pub in Calgary were "coming up to me afterwards and telling me that I did really well" and how they (Oliver) "had a really good experience in Edmonton as well, really accepting." When reflecting on their drag performances with Ben Sover and the Sirloins, Justin Time comments that "appreciative audiences are amazing. [They] just amp up a validation of your sexualized energy, all of that, almost like you get to participate in this love story that is a Hollywood love story. . . . So, I think it's a bit of a flirtation." James Dean also characterizes the relationship between drag kings and their audiences as "generous. . . . [from] both ways."

This support and validation came from both audiences and from within drag king troupes. As Phoenix's Drag Journal (Appendix A) illustrates, social support was important, if not critical, for many who were exploring and/or struggling with their gender and sexuality expression/identity:

I came from a place of being severely paranoid that someone was going to catch me doing something wrong, and I was going to somehow be punished for exploring a part of myself that I never had an opportunity to really explore before. And that hasn't happened [in drag]. I haven't been punished for it. I have a group of people who are on my side on that sort of thing. So, it's nice to let other people know that you can have support, too. Just sometimes you do have to look for it. (Niles Jupiter)

The appreciation of working in a community setting and the opportunity to be seen and have their identities validated featured strongly in participant stories. As with any kind of ontological intervention, there is an internal struggle with the self ("I"), but this is also heavily influenced by an external struggle with society

("them"). In other words, what other people think and say matters to our understandings of ourselves, and the choices we make are never solely our own. Furthermore, the way institutions and legal documents categorize us matters (e.g., education, identification documents, healthcare). Trans and non-binary people are particularly vulnerable because ultimately, it's the perceived biological structures that largely influence how social and institutional structures define someone's gender (and its performance). Lil' Mack, for example, talked about feelings of validation while up on stage in contrast to everyday experiences:

Validation. I remember hearing a lot of the "woot woots" and the "woohoos" and stuff like that, and certainly you don't tend to hear that. I mean they may happen out in the world, but you know, you tend to pick up more on the kind of stares, or weird looks, or kids asking weird questions, kind of stuff . . . and the value, as I've said before, was made more obvious when people are screaming and hootin' and hollering. And whether it's sexualized or not, it could just be a form of . . . hey what you're doing is awesome, there's a form of support that I felt in the community that was . . . great!

The performative phenomena of constituency audiences makes this validation and support possible. And as Mac U. More astutely points out:

We need that validation and we need to know that there are other people out there that share our identities in some way or another, and that's why drag is important to me, because it validates and normalizes and celebrates everything that has to do with my gender and my sexuality, and that sort of expression.

For many kings, part of this validation encompasses sex appeal and celebration of non-normative desires and bodies.

Yeah, I do think there's that [sex appeal] as well. Certainly for women and men . . . and trans [people], whoever . . . for people who desire masculine women, . . . it's an opportunity for them to have a space for that desire to not be again frowned upon or stigmatized. Medicalized. (Lil' Mack)

Drag gives opportunity for expressing queer desire, specifically for masculine women, that might otherwise be publicly prohibited or discouraged and that expression in large part relies on perceptions of safety.

We can think about this safety/validation nexus for both performers and audiences alike, and this is where the notion of constituency audience is particularly important. Feinberg (1998) rightly situates the right to gender expression alongside other basic human rights such as shelter, health care, dignity, and respect (p. 3); but it's the encouragement and validation of our genders that really matter. A reliance solely on freedom of gender expression doesn't take into account how some expressions are impossible for some and unethical

for others. First, in advocating for freedom of gender expression, Feinberg's account risks promoting freedom to express and reproduce types of gender expression that enact and invoke the very violence Feinberg wishes to extinguish: namely, misogynistic masculinity. Nor does it account for how expressions of normative femininity might also endorse a certain type of internalized violence against the self (Bartky, 1990). Living under the persistent threat of violence can drain a person's energy and can actually deny the oppressed their freedom and dignity (Young, 1990, p. 62), so a failure to condemn the violence connected to certain gender expressions tacitly undermines freedoms for some (Heyes, 2003, p. 1095). Furthermore, many people have a stake in maintaining the current sex-gender systems in order to maintain their own privilege. Importantly, Feinberg's (1998) advocacy for accepting all gender expressions fails to understand gender and sex as co-constructed with other people and communities. Regardless of how we feel or what we say, our genders are structurally constituted in ways that are mostly out of our control, at least as individuals. Although we can express our gender identities with our words, actions, dress, movement, or even surgery and legal documentation (changing gender to X, for example), there is no guarantee that other people or the state/province in which we live will understand, agree, or accept what it is we desire and what we feel is authentically us. There is no sure way that others will read us in the ways we wish to be read.

Drag kinging not only allows performers to articulate gendered agency, but its audiences also create temporary liminal spaces that support safely transgressing gender boundaries. This occurs whether in a specifically queer bar or in another venue organized and queered by the troupe organizers and audience themselves. Queers, like other minority groups, use spaces to resist or subvert dominant spatial identities through the transformation of existing spaces and/or the creation of alternative ones (Aitchison 1999; Aitchison 2003; Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley 2007; Skeggs 1999). Lefebvre (1991) suggests that social space is not a subject, object, or container with boundaries, but rather a set of relationships and forms between people and things. Similarly, Soja (1989) describes the socio-spatial dialectic where "social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent; that social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent" (p. 81). We can readily see Lefebvre's (1991) and Soja's (1989) points in the kinds of

relations formed between kings and audiences that Lil' Mack and Mac U. More describe above; that is, it's the particular kinds of relationships between people and objects that create social spaces. Moreover, our embodiments make a difference to our experiences of spaces and places as our size, shape, health, appearance, dress, comportment, sexuality, and sexual practices inescapably affect how we respond to others and how people respond to us (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010, p. 21). As Lil' Mack's quote above and Phoenix's stories demonstrate, drag king spaces can challenge heterosexual ways of being, moving, loving, and relating to one another; they have the potential to challenge normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, and gendered embodiment.

Niles Jupiter talked about having “a group of people who are on my side” and who supported them; similarly, in Phoenix's journal (Appendix A), Phoenix talks about how “it's fun doing it in community and the fact that there was that group context to it, so I wasn't doing it on my own, which I think would have been a lot scarier.” In their study of the drag king troupe, Disposable Boy Toys (DBT), in Santa Barbara, Shapiro (2007) identified four collective mechanisms that facilitated participants' gender identity transformations: information and resources, imaginative possibility, opportunities for enactment, and social support. The later three also feature strongly in Edmonton drag king experiences. In Shapiro's study, social support came directly from the drag troupe itself. In the Albertan context, social support comes from both drag troupes and constituency audiences.<sup>71</sup> In addition to supporting femmes and empowering femininities, Shapiro (2007) says that “many members found in drag a world previously denied them, a place where being female bodied, performing masculinity, and passing as male were valued” (p. 265). Similar stories emerged for the Albertan

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<sup>71</sup> Here the definition of that audience may well go beyond the live audience in the room, but becomes an enlarged pool of supportive reception including, for example, reviews, cultural calendars, university syllabi, and a wider critical apparatus.

kings in this study. Shapiro's study also revealed that while "the combination of a close-knit supportive community in general and social support for member's gender choices in particular created a space that validated individuals' gender identities," one member of the troupe highlights that "DBT did not provide the same kind of support for members of different racial backgrounds" (p. 266). Thus, within DBT, for some there was a distinction between "creating safer public spaces and fostering an environment conducive to personal identity shifts" (Shapiro, 2007, p. 266).

In the DBT context, experiences of identity shifts were reported from white kings as being supported while kings of colour didn't report much of this for their identity shifts. Of the four troupes interviewed in my Alberta study, no interviewees mentioned experiencing differences in social support within drag king contexts based on racial background. However, to the best of my knowledge, all interviewees from the Fly Bastards, the Alberta Beef, and the Sirloins were white; only Queer Royale (Edmonton) and the Fake Mustache (Calgary) were racially mixed troupes. In my research, these kinds of racial differences didn't come up with Queer Royale kings. It's not easy to say why this might be. Perhaps it was because Queer Royale started with an explicitly anti-oppressive intention in the workshop that included anti-racism; and in our workshop, we explicitly discussed the intersections of race, masculinity, identity, and performance and included kings of various ethnicities in our investigations of kinging models (i.e., D.R.E.D, Stormé DeLarverie, and the film *Venus Boyz* [Baur, 2002]). Or perhaps I'm not aware of any racial differences in terms of social support or identity transformation simply because interviewees didn't share them with me. Or perhaps because I'm white. It's worth noting that I didn't have specific questions about race.

#### **Lack of social support.**

Although most interviewees experienced social support, there were some who needed more from their troupes than what they received.

I feel like what we were doing with Alberta Beef was very young. We were kind of grappling with some of these ideas, but didn't really have, or I didn't really have much of a lens at that time. I feel like there was a lot of learning around choreography, around mannerisms, around the physical part of it, and I didn't feel very emotionally cared for. It was kind of tumultuous, and that's possibly because I didn't reach out very much. There's definitely some people that I would talk to. What I've seen

happening with Queer Royale shows is just a way different level of inquiry and community and support. (Rusty Nails)

Although Rusty talks quite a lot about gaining confidence and their political and gender identity transformations through their drag king experiences, they felt that debriefing some of the performances would have helped them feel more emotionally supported. For example, they wished the group had talked less about choreography mishaps and more about how pieces affected people emotionally. Oscar de la Hymen also voiced some lack of community support when she got pregnant during her tenure with the Alberta Beef. Feeling very tired and falling asleep early made it difficult for her to do rehearsals, but she felt that if the troupe was really supposed to be a feminist thing, “they could have been like, okay we’ll have one rehearsal at 10 so Oscar can make it because she’s pregnant and can’t stay awake.”

Although these two stories show where support was lacking, drag kinging overall seemed to provide a great deal of social support and gender validation for these interviewees. When we hone in on the importance of the gender validation story, we can see how drag kinging provides social support that can help performers work through an important theoretical and real-life question: how can we have the agency to self-define (Feinberg, 1998) when gender is relationally and structurally constituted (Bettcher, 2007)? We can understand agency as the capacity for individualized choice and action, but this capacity is always affected by the “institutional and historical conditions of possibility” (Heyes, 2003, p. 1094). Regardless of how much we want to be solely self-determining, what other people say and think matters. It affects us. And in part, it defines us. So, how do we articulate non-binary gender identities within socio-cultural contexts that deny our existence? Without identity affirmation, can we still be who we want to be? Anyone familiar with this daily struggle knows how exhausting it can be. And at the end of the day, we still want validation. It’s part of being human—we need others to see us as we see ourselves. Sometimes we need this to feel loved. Sometimes we need this to survive.

### **The communicative function of gender in liminal drag spaces.**

Liminal settings aren't merely places to let off steam so that we don't further disrupt the status quo, and they aren't just reflections of our social reality. They have *generative* and innovative power (Alexander, 1991, p. 9). These kinds of settings have the capacity to affect social change and to transform people's identities in creative ways unimaginable by dominant structures (Turner, 1974, p. 56-57). Like rituals, in the liminal spaces of drag we see social structure and performance interact dialectically; more specifically, we also see the potential "dissolution of normative social structure" in these spaces (Turner, 1982, p. 29). We can think of liminal performance "as being located at the edge of what is possible" (Broadhurst, n.d.). What I argue here is that the performative frame of drag kinging in combination with supportive constituency audiences has the *potential* to disrupt the natural attitude and allow for alternative communicative functions of gender presentation. In this section, I explore what the communicative functions of gender in drag spaces might look like and what the implications might be for interviewees and trans and non-binary people.

Bradford (2002) says, "a lot of what makes a drag king show what it is, is the audience. With drag kinging, audience is community—a community with a range of histories, realities, meanings, and fantasies, that recognizes, validates, and celebrates your act" (Bradford, 2002, pp. 27–28). Whereas drag kings are virtually unintelligible within heteronormative frameworks and to the straight male gaze (also read here: in public space), lgbttq+ audiences can recognize the subcultural codes, symbols, parody, camp, and celebration that drag kings perform. Similarly, Escudero-Alias (2009) says that "the norms through which performativity works must have a history and be recognizable" (p. 71). In Judith Butler's (1993) words: "if a performative provisionally succeeds," it is because "that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*" (*emphasis original*, pp. 226–227). Drag audiences can recognize, for example, variations on queer desires, cultural codes of butch-femme or gay male leather scenes, and increasingly the technologies of gender transformation/transitioning. Drag kings, as Ayouf and Podmore (2002) contend, "give expression to forms of desire that exist within lesbian cultures" (p. 59). Even when some audiences see drag kings for the first time, Escudero-Alias (2009) contends that "through cross-

dressing, drag kings' performances involve an audience familiar with gender codes and receptive to gender subversion" (p. 71). This familiarity—or at the very least, openness—is integral to reading drag king acts and thus to understanding the communicative function of gender presentation within them.

So, what does gender presentation communicate in drag spaces? Does drag kinging disrupt the representational relation between gender presentation and the sexed body in a foundational way? As indicated in Phoenix's journal (Appendix A), people in the gay community respect people in drag and will change their pronouns accordingly. For DEE, "even though everyone of course knew it was drag, it still felt like I was being read and interacted with in the way that I wanted to be." Many interviewees shared stories about how kinging gave them opportunities to have their masculine expression be seen and valued. Justin Time talks about how drag was a confirming feature in their ability to try on more masculine expression in daily life by "being visibly seen as this external masculine presence, and that acceptance." Oliver Heart says drag gives them an "outlet to be a boy and be seen as a male, and then still go home at the end of the night and still be female and still be who I want to be. So, it just kind of relieves a lot of that stress of the gender identity." Lil' Mack talks about the role of drag simultaneously as an "overt embodiment of masculinity that is not easily dismissed" which is, "in that sense, . . . deeply queer. Like I'm here look at me, kind of thing" and as an "internal aspect," "an acknowledgement to myself or a valuing of that aspect of myself." On the one hand, we can see drag kinging as a gender affirming practice for non-binary, trans, and gender questioning kings because audiences and fellow kings respect the gender you present without questioning, even if that gender is ambiguous. As some interviewees contend, and I agree - it's part of the fun and the fantasy to buy in. Whether you "pass" as male makes no difference. In some ways, the performative frame protects you from further inquiry into your gender status, and the communicative function of gender becomes not about securing heterosexual engagement, but about creatively expressing queer desires, masculine expression, and identity.

However, MW contends that in his experience in a typical Court system<sup>72</sup> drag show, trans performers in particular “get read wrong” because they are “seen as lesbians doing drag.” MW says that

it takes a long time for that word to get out, that they are who they are. And everybody struggles with it a little bit. And I don’t know at what point in time they become kind of a bio drag performer, or some form of that, [where] they are a male performing as male? So, they’re kind of in this in between space that’s funny ... and it’s very new, I think.

Thus, we could argue that while the natural attitude may be temporarily suspended, it’s not subverted in any lasting way. Audiences may respect the pronouns of the drag you present (king, queen) while you are in drag, but they may not alter their perception of a stable sexed body beneath the drag. In fact, this is a central critique of drag (queens mostly) as it relates to transphobia. Reinforcing this perception is problematic for transpeople in particular because the general population already assumes biology is the fundamental fact of gender identity. And as such, trans identities are not respected, acknowledged, or validated; indeed, transpeople are disproportionately vulnerable to threats of suicide and actual suicides, poverty, harassment, and murder.<sup>73</sup> Of course, context matters. Transpeople do drag. Cisgender gay men do drag kinging.

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<sup>72</sup> The Court System was described in Chapter One.

<sup>73</sup> In the United States, the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force conducted a national survey, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report on the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling, 2011), which found that respondents lived in extreme poverty as their sample was nearly four times more likely to have a household income of less than \$10,000 per year compared to the general population (p. 2). They also found that 41% of respondents reported attempting suicide compared to 1.6% of the general population; these suicide rates increase for those who lost a job due to bias (55%), were harassed/bullied in school (51%), had low household income, or were the victim of physical assault (61%) or sexual assault (64%) (p. 2). Although Canada has no national research comparable to *Injustice at Every Turn*, the community research organization, *Trans Pulse*, conducted a robust provincial project/survey in Ontario called the *Trans Pulse Project* which sheds some light

Genderqueer people do drag. MW's quote above speaks to a reading particular of Court drag, which has historically been more binary and traditional. While it's true that not all drag disrupts genital essentialism, I would argue that in specific drag king shows such as the Alberta Beef and Queer Royale, this binary reading is not as common. Not only do we see more gender blending and gender-fucking in these drag king troupes that explicitly call binary gender into question, but also over time drag audiences and troupes in Edmonton have become more aware of non-binary and trans experiences. More discussion and examples of gender-fuck drag will be discussed later in this chapter.

Performatively, we must also consider how much of the historical juxtaposition of gender and sex in drag *for comedic value* is still at play. Is the absurdity of a "man in a dress" still pervasive in queen culture, and is this juxtaposition the crux of the comedy? As noted in Chapter One, this kind of comedy was quite common in the early days of female impersonation. In contemporary queening, it's also not uncommon to hear a queen self-deprecate on stage about being a man in a dress. However, we might consider how this common campy trope is an attempt to cope with homophobia through laughter rather than tears; by mocking their own queer embodiment, do queens make a joke out of being an effeminate fag? Does the joke then become one played on the rest of the straight world? Or are queens simply trying to elicit laughs at the incongruence between their body and their dress? If this is the case, it's quite easy to understand why some transpeople (women in particular) might feel offended at a queen show if this kind of jest feels a little too close to their everyday lived experiences.

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on the lives of transgender people in Canada. The results from this project were also highly cited and used in the Ontario Human Rights Commission's 2014 "Policy on Preventing Discrimination Because of Gender Identity and Gender Expression" (<http://transpulseproject.ca/>).

For kings, the comedic value of parodying and mocking an oppressive institution (patriarchy, sexism, hegemonic masculinity) operates in a very different way, as Jack Strap has explained. But there still seems to be some potential here for an observer to find the theatrics of “playing at being man” comedic. Does this play trivialize the everyday experiences of transpeople? Importantly, as DEE points out, “Drag is not funny or fun to watch because it’s imitating transpeople. Because actually, it’s over the top and big and extreme expression, and transpeople if anything are kind of like, under the radar usually.” Drag doesn’t aim to trivialize gender and sexual minority struggles; it aims to entertain and to open up liminal spaces for fantasy and for experimenting and playing with gender. Of course, often that experimentation and humour is crass, hypersexualized, and heavily focused on gender, sex, and sexuality. And as MW has pointed out, some transpeople might be particularly sensitive to these kinds of issues, depending on their experiences. Moreover, how the communicative relations of gender function in drag spaces depends on the people there and the particular group performing—their exposure to feminist and trans issues, sensitivities, and people.

Of course, there’s also the danger that people conflate drag kings and transmen, which can lead to viewing trans identities as performance. The critique here is that drag is harmful to transpeople because the general public thinks that everyone who crosses gender must be in drag. This is what DEE calls the “knock-on effect” of drag. We might also see this effect exacerbated by theoretical ideas like performativity, which can lead some to misconceptualize all gender as performance. But performativity doesn’t equate to performance; understanding gender as performed is not the same as understanding gender as performative. Performing gender on or off stage requires a conscious intention to enact, to play a role. Gender, under the theory of performativity, is a set of repetitions or acts by the body “within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of sub-stance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Through repetition, gender therefore appears as an essence or as ontologically coherent with a fixed sex and sexuality. To say something is performative means it has produced effects; for gender, this might mean learned and repeated movements, gestures, dress codes, or speech acts that produce the impression that one is a man or a woman. Performativity does not mean that we have the daily choice of putting on this gender or

that gender. However, the distinction between performing and performativity is slippery, particularly in drag king contexts when kings might simultaneously be intentionally performing a role while also perhaps changing their own learned bodily movements. We might ask if experiences off-stage, when gender is performative but not performed, is the same kind of epistemic category as experiences on-stage, when gender is both performative and performed. Surely, performed gender necessarily includes performative gender.

Sometimes this slippage is quite tricky for people considering or already negotiating gender transitioning. One of the transmen in this research says, for example, that “[drag] allowed me to play with masculinity in this very specific context; it didn’t have to mean anything, ’cause everybody else was doing it around me” (James Dean). Drag’s play is a liminal experience similar to children’s play. When children play doctor, or teacher, for example, they assume the roles and experiment with their identities while there is nothing at stake, no sanctioning. Al, a non-binary king, says similarly that

I think because it’s a stage it’s acceptable, in a sense. You’re “playing a role” . . . But I think that concept of play gave it a safer space to be able to do it without everything having to have a lot of meaning or significance in your day to day life. It was more nonchalant in a way.

While the stage allowed for safely transgressing gender boundaries, we can see an interesting tension between drag “not having to mean anything” and drag playing a formative role in participants’ lives, whether that be in regard to gender transitioning, developing a political voice, or gaining self-confidence. In regard to gender transitioning, this tension makes sense if we consider the tension of some people’s lived experiences. James Dean says, for example, that drag was a lifeline that helped him deal with life before he could be authentic (i.e., before medical transition was possible for him and before he even consciously knew he wanted to transition). James started doing drag when he was 16 and did it for four to five years before he started transitioning.

I think for a long time, James Dean was the guy I pseudo-wanted to be. . . . I think he became more of this character that created a sustainable male identity for me that I can step into, it felt like a stress relief, it felt like letting off steam. Like I dealt with dysmorphia and the frustration of being in the wrong body, without acknowledging it. Ninety percent of the time and then one night a month I got to be significantly more myself or a hyperbolized version of who I wanted to be or thought I should

be, and it kind of reset all my circuits. I remember thinking that okay yeah, I can get through another month now.

Yet we can also see in James' story the potential tensions between performance and performativity. For example, when kings experiment with masculinity through body and speech enactments on stage and then incorporate those learned and practiced acts into their everyday lives, does the performance then become performativity? Indeed, the tension between being and performing is an important theoretical point to consider when responding to the view that trans identities are performances. As we saw in Phoenix's journal (Appendix A), the real-life implications of this theoretical tension are what matter the most on this issue:

the idea of gender being performative goes against the idea of gender being an inherent part of identity. Recognizing gender expression is performative and that it changes from context to context is fine. It's all lovely and theoretical, but who you believe or feel yourself to be doesn't necessarily feel like a performance.

While the theoretical tensions between being and performing are not easily resolvable for anyone, the false conflation of drag kings/queens with trans men/women is something that can be tangibly addressed.

Although the public's perception and ignorance about these differences is not the fault of drag or any one drag performer, we must still continue to question and ask ourselves how drag has the potential to further marginalize transpeople and what performers and MCs can do to address this issue.

While we can't say for certain how audiences interpret the gender identities and expressions of drag kings, what we do know is that drag kinging was a source of gender validation and support for interviewees, specifically because of constituency audiences who are generous and supportive, and that for performers, drag was a significant and rare enclave where the natural attitude was turned on its head. Bettcher (2007) argues that reforming the communicative-representational function of gender presentation relies on "intervening in the very ways in which heterosexual sex and racialized bodies are fundamentally conceptualized" (p. 59). This means changing the foundation—eliminating the natural attitude in which the communicative-representational function of gender presentation is grounded. Although drag king performance has, in some ways, become conventional within the scope of its own internal horizon, drag performance can open up new sets of communicative relations and opportunities to embody status and

identity not experienced in everyday contexts. But do these opportunities in drag spaces transfer out of such contexts to impact any lasting social change? Bettcher contends that “those who embrace the *natural attitude* tend to be suspicious of more theoretical notions of sex. For insofar as the *natural attitude* constitutes a kind of pretheoretical common sense about sex, it tends to maintain itself even in the face of clear-cut evidence that the attitude is false” (p. 49). Indeed, a particularly grim image starts to emerge if we take into account Bettcher’s illumination of the communicative relation, the perceived inescapability of the natural attitude, and the inability to self-define (identity enforcement)—one that seems to deny any real chance for agency or social change.

Perhaps we could find a better way of framing the natural attitude, one that occupies a middle ground between Bettcher’s (2007) belief in its ability to endure, and Feinberg’s (1998) blanket assumption that people will willingly and eagerly change their worldviews. In other words, we might frame the natural attitude as one that *can* change, not simply through the demands of individual freedom, but in conjunction with incremental legal, educational, and social reform of the cultural institutions that sustain the current heteronormative sex-gender system and the types of oppression that it supports. As Heyes (2003) suggests,

However political resistance through transforming gender has been articulated, the struggle has been on the disputed terrain where the life of the individual meets its institutional and historical conditions of possibility. Part of feminism is changing those institutions and creating history, but in the interim feminists must make sense of the scope and limits of our agency *within* structures of oppression and privilege. (p. 1094)

Liminal kinging spaces and performances may not lead directly to institutional change, but they do provide space for gendered agency *in the interim* as well as opportunities for imaginative possibilities as to what gender-based social change could look like.

### **Constituency audiences and drag kinging as a political tool.**

Whereas constituency audiences play a key role in opening up these imaginative possibilities, these kinds of audiences are also grounds to question drag kinging’s political usefulness because as the genre has evolved over time, we see the reduced potential for provocation and surprise for their audiences. Of course,

over time, any theatre develops its own set of rules and “a new theatre audience with its own standards and expectations of theatre [is] tapped into, and subsequently initiated and educated into particular modes of theatre” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 52). Like other theatre club scenes, early drag was a space for controversial performance and provocation where audiences “were part of a select group of people who were offered a chance to experience theatre that was denied to the general public, on the grounds of its obscenity, radicalism, offensiveness or impropriety in general” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 52). In fact, “because of the long absence and silencing of gay and lesbian related subjects, and homophobic disposition in society at large, homosexuality retained its provocative quality as a stage subject until well in the 1970s, especially in mainstream theatre” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 58). Over time, the subject’s provocation potential waned. Like other gay- and lesbian-related theatre, drag kinging (and drag in general) maintains an attitude of extreme open-mindedness around gender and sexuality; in other words, it “operates within the premises of very liberated sexual mores” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 66). For example, nudity and crass humour are quite normative, and certain provocations are almost expected in drag spaces where “sexual body parts are referred to and manipulated in the same way as teacups and saucers are in domestic drama” (Defraeye, 1994, p. 66). We could argue then that contemporary drag (kinging), when performed for a constituency audience, isn’t provocative specifically because of the constituency audience and the overuse of specific tropes (e.g., the phallus or the crotch) that have evolved for such audiences. We might also consider whether a performance (or anything for that matter) must be provocative in order to be politically useful. In this section, I discuss several ways in which drag kings employ kinging as a political tool; in doing so, I also analyze the dilemma of constituency audiences and the potential therapeutic and political power of Albertan drag king performances.

Compared to other cities in North America, drag kinging in the 1990s in Edmonton was new and provocative. All three Fly Bastards share stories of disgruntled audiences in their first few shows. DEE describes what he interpreted as a “fear of an anti-butth sentiment” when they performed at the lesbian bar with “proper old school plaid shirt, crew-cut dykes,” while Jack Strap recalls a few people working that same bar “rolling their eyes” and some people laughing at them as they got on “stage and deliberately [made] fools

of ourselves . . . and were poking fun and being irreverent and not really trying too hard to be cool.”

Although Jack says these reactions weren't that big a deal and that they “always just thought of [those actions] as a product of people who had been abused by society and now were just sort of mimicking that,” it's particularly telling of what early Edmonton drag king audiences might have been like before a concrete constituency emerged. For example, Michael Phair recalls the first time he heard there was going to be drag kings performing in the early 1990s at the lesbian bar, Secrets; he remembered thinking he couldn't really imagine what that would look like and said that “among the gay male population there was a lot of bewilderment as to what this was.” He said a lesbian in a mustache would sometimes be part of drag queen shows, but as far as he knows, they weren't referred to as drag kings before the early 1990s (2017).

Even in subsequent years, most kings who performed had either never seen a live drag king before or had very limited exposure to them before they themselves performed. A young Calgary king, for example, referred to drag kinging in the 2010s as “relatively new in Alberta.” For virtually all Edmonton kings, performing was something new and exciting, rife with possibility even if they had some exposure to drag kinging through popular or academic work. We might attribute this phenomenon to the fact that Edmonton drag king troupes have each been relatively short-lived (two to five years), and while there were connections among the troupes, there wasn't a consistent presence. Moreover, most Edmonton troupes didn't put on monthly shows, as the Fake Mustache in Calgary do. Thus, even though the Edmonton king legacy extends back to the late 1990s, there has also been a lack of continuity of a single troupe. While Edmonton audiences can recognize the allure and practice of cross-dressing and the performance frame of drag in which kings perform, they aren't as familiar with kings as they are with queens. This is because queens in Edmonton (and more generally worldwide) have a more visible and continuous history. Audiences may or may not have seen a drag king before. In this way, while drag kinging may have reduced provocation potential for their own constituency audiences, there's every chance that kings could perform for audiences who have never seen a drag king show before.

Moreover, people who practice drag kinging, regardless of their era, still mobilize kinging as a political tool. While some drag king themes may not be new, “the audience’s and the theatre’s familiarity with the subject allows these constituency theatres to concentrate on creative explorations of a certain theme, rather than having to deal with the shocking effect the theme may have on a mainstream audience” (Defraeye, 1994, pp. 61–62). What might be considered risky or provocative (e.g., nudity, sexual content, queer themes) in mainstream theatre might otherwise be considered status quo or an expected trope for a drag king constituency audience, depending on context. Drag kings depend on the audience’s ability to read, value, and celebrate feminist critiques of masculinity (e.g., parody, hyperbole) and non-normative presentations of desire in performance (e.g., nudity and stripping, queer, BDSM, strap-ons). The produced effects of constituency audiences may be more about affirming existing beliefs rather than political provocation (Defraeye, 1995).

Similarly, beginning in the 1980s in New York’s WOW Café theatre, lesbian feminists performed for predominantly lesbian feminist audiences; the topic of lesbianism was a theme which they explored creatively rather than functioning as a shocking or comedic device as it would have in mainstream theatre (Defraeye, 1994, p. 63). Another New York performer, Karen Finley, used extremely provocative text and images “based on grotesque perversions and subversions of traditional female gender perceptions” in order to shock and shame spectators, especially heterosexual men (p. 64). However, because she performs predominately for feminist audiences, “her provocative rhetoric is either lost on an already converted audience or only serves to reconfirm existing preconceptions” (p. 65). As a political tool, what kinds of provocations does drag kinging offer? What are the political intentions of these Albertan drag kings? What kinds of political messages can we ascertain from their performances and are they successful for their respective audiences? To start, we could argue that drag as a performance genre relies on the disruption of a heteronormative framework—whether that be demonstrations of homoerotic love and sex or attempting to subvert binary gendered systems, homonormativity, genital essentialism, or misogyny. While these topics are not politically new within Edmonton’s lgbttq+ communities, they are not necessarily mainstream either, particularly in Alberta.

Drag kings attempt to disrupt heterosexual frameworks, most notably through campy humour, homoerotic love, mimicry, exaggeration, parody, and gender-fucking, blending, and bending. Gender-fucking means that drag kings blur the representational relation between their sexed body and gender presentation through intentional reconfigurations of secondary sex characteristics. We see examples of gender-fucking in Randy Packer and Lawrence of Alabia's "Blur Number" where the two kings remove their socks from their crotches and put them in their bras on stage; the effects of such actions provoke confusion and incoherence around gender, cross-dressing, and secondary sex characteristics. Lucas Crawford (Lawrence of Alabia) recalls in the documentary, *And the Rest is Drag*,

I think there's like a convention to drag kinging or probably a lot of kinds of performance, that you wanna kinda look your hottest and you wanna pull off being a guy, that it's somehow about realism or something. And that for me in addition to being like 'fuck yeah, I'm fat *and* I'm hot, or whatever. Or I'm tryin' to be, a little bit' [Randy Packer laughing in background] was also like taking apart that kind of ... taking apart the drag king, the drag king thing. Like you want me to cohere as like hot dude. Like here's my fucking bra. And like let's be fucking honest. What is surprising you as an audience and making you think about shit? It's not like I drew some fake hair over my real hair. It's like here's the bra, here's my tits. Hello dissertation supervisor, here's my ass. You know. (Brittain, Peers, & Mootoo, 2009)

We might also think of this kind of subversion with Ponyboi's cock tassel coupled with taped-over tits (Image 42), and Ben Sover simultaneously sporting lacy lil' girl socks and a creepy pornstache (Image 45). We see gender-fucking and ambiguously-gendered bodies in Ponyboi's drag boilesque pieces when he reimagines the breast reveal (Images 42 & 44). Instead of the breast reveal as the narrative climax, "Daddy's Boi" and "I'm Mine" feature three alternative reveals; for the former, there's the initial reveal of Ponyboi behind the feather fans, Pony's bare back message (Images 40, 41, & 44), and the cock tassel (Image 42). In "I'm Mine," I incorporate the reveal (undressing) of the mirror by taking off the silky fabric; the reveal of the bare back message (Image 43); and the cock tassel. In "Daddy's Boi," by subverting the breast reveal and writing "Daddy's Boi" on my back, the performance becomes an explicit act of agency (identity claim/assertion). Kings might also simultaneously wear lipstick *and* facial hair (e.g. Ponyboi, Alberta Beef) or other cultural indexes which blur gender boundaries. The Alberta Beef's queen number also serves as another example of gender-fucking and political provocation. The Beef opened their second show as queens, which

according to some, shocked and confused the audience who were expecting a king-only show. In this piece, gender-fucking ran deep as the Beef blurred the lines among female masculinity, butchiness, and gay male effeminacy. As part of this number, Lawrence of Alabia kept his home-grown facial hair underneath



**Image 45: Ben Sover, Miss PMS, and Mac U. More**

his makeup and simulated shaving with shaving cream and a razor on stage.<sup>74</sup> In this way, he challenged the conventions of drag queening (e.g., leaving facial hair unshaven and questioning the notion of who can perform as a drag queen), while also confounding the audience's perception of crossing gender. In their

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<sup>74</sup> Some of this performance is captured in *And The Rest is Drag* (Brittain, Peers, & Moottoo, 2009).

performances of Mademois' Al at *Queer Hallow's Eve*, Al blurs gender lines by combining head-to-toe femme gear with a full beard (Image 46).



**Image 46: Mademois' Al and Back-up Dancers at *QHE*, 2014**

Homoerotic love between drag king characters also demonstrates queer world-making and a disruption of the heteronormative framework; we observe this kind of love, for example, through the characters Randy and Dennis as well as *Queer Royale's* and the *Alberta Beef's* cowboy drag pieces. Randy and Dennis, for example, are two white-trash-boys in love performed by Ponyboi and Ben Sover; they are also explorations of whiteness and class through drag. Together they embody a queering of working-class white masculinity (although they don't really like working). Randy and Dennis are goofy and entertaining, but we try to also show glimpses of their feelings and their intimacy toward each other as they would exist in a semi-closeted way (Images 47 & 48). Randy and Dennis like hanging out, having fun, drinking beer, smoking weed, and being free from "the man" (Images 47 & 49). They don't have to participate in capitalism, production, or

menial labor just to appear morally good in the eyes of others, which is part of our queering of class norms. In many ways, Randy and Dennis embrace a queer sense of time and place and rebel against the middle- and working-class values intertwined with heterosexuality, reproduction, maturation, and the 40-hour work week (Halberstam, 2005).



**Image 47: Randy (left) and Dennis (right) on 95 St./Jasper Ave., 2012, Photo by Shirl Tse**



Image 48: Randy and Dennis on 95 St./Jasper Ave., 2012, Photo by Shirl Tse



**Image 49: Randy (left) and Dennis (right) on 95 St./Jasper Ave., 2012, Photo by Shirl Tse**

The homoeroticism found in both Queer Royale's and the Alberta Beef's cowboy numbers demonstrate another example of intentional political disruption of heteronormative masculinity within a specifically Albertan context. Both numbers are performed exclusively for constituency audiences and feature parodies of a hegemonic, aggressive cowboy masculinity coupled with extensive groping and touching each other. Kings are decked out in cowboy hats, shit kickers, big belt buckles, and tight denim. Queer Royale's

number, for example, begins with the song “Slow Hand”<sup>75</sup> by country singer Conway Twitty, which features the following chorus:

You want a man with a slow hand  
You want a lover with an easy touch  
You want somebody who will spend some time  
Not come and go in a heated rush baby, believe me I understand  
When it comes to love, you want a slow hand (Bettis & Clark, 1981)

This song plays while four kings circle each other running their eyes and hands up and down each other’s bodies. After a couple minutes, the song “Pony” by Ginuwine<sup>76</sup> (Garrett, Lumkin & Mosley, 1996) cuts in as Colon Ize unbuttons their sexy black leather vest, Mac U. More (a.k.a. AJ McClean Time) grinds on a Member of the Legislative Assembly in the audience, and Ponyboi whips out their rider’s crop and mounts and rides Ben Sover, whipping his ass to the beat and to the following hyper-sexual lyrics:

I’m just a bachelor  
I’m looking for a partner  
Someone who knows how to ride  
Without even falling off  
Gotta be compatible  
Takes me to my limits  
Girl when I break you off  
I promise that you won’t want to get off  
If you’re horny, let’s do it  
Ride it, my pony  
My saddle’s waiting  
Come and jump on it

Ponyboi and Colin Ize then encircle Ben Sover with sexy hip and bandana dances while Mac takes off his shirt and brings an audience plant (Johnny Hash in her everyday femme flannel wear) onto the stage. We all

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<sup>75</sup> YouTube link to song: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LpnL-RLJrc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LpnL-RLJrc)

<sup>76</sup> YouTube link to song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbnoG2dsUk0>

then grind it on stage together while Johnny lets a beer spittle down her face. When she exits the stage, we end the number with a short line dance to the following lyrics from the song “Don’t Call Him a Cowboy:”<sup>77</sup>

So, don’t call him a cowboy  
Until you’ve seen him ride  
'Cause a Stetson hat and them fancy boots  
Don’t tell you what’s inside, no

And if he ain’t good in the saddle  
Lord, you won’t be satisfied  
So don’t call him a cowboy  
Until you’ve seen him ride

The action and the lyrics sexualize this kind of cowboy masculinity with words and phrases like “riding,” “good in the saddle,” and “satisfied;” the lyrics also implicitly suggest that the external dressings of this kind of masculinity (“Stetson hat and fancy boots”) aren’t really what gives this kind of masculinity its prowess, but rather the way in which a person performs sexually.

The effectiveness of parodic humour in particular in drag kinging, as with any kind of humor, depends on the degree to which people share some bonds within the social sphere, some sort of collective view or common understanding (Critchley, 2002; Wright, 2006). The therapeutic power in parodic humor is one significant way in which interviewees use drag kinging as a political tool. Dupriez (1984, 1991) defines parody as a “conscious and deliberate imitation, either of content or form, which intends to achieve a mocking, or simply a comic, effect” (p. 327). We might also add here that parody often produces critical effect. Parody relies on repetition of form; therefore, an audience must be familiar with said form for parody to work. Although we can’t define successful parody, we can observe that kings employ parody in their performances: they experiment with reproducing the form of hegemonic masculinity for an audience

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<sup>77</sup> YouTube link to song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9LEBO9qIT0>

presumably familiar both with this form and with the enjoyment of tearing it down. Jack Strap, for example, plays with campy humour and hyperbole in a similar way as he employs large popsicles and fruit to stand in for a cock—a common trope to be sure, but still a crowd pleaser. In the realm of parody, Critchley (2002) notes that “by laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor’s new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed” (p. 11). There is therapeutic power in humour and parody in drag kinging, as demonstrated in both Rusty Nail’s take on “[making their] displeasure known” through parody and feeling a sense of satisfaction in “making fun of the men in [their] family,” and Jack Strap’s ideas around “failing at masculinity” in a comedic way in order to deconstruct it.

Although these examples attest to how interviewees use drag kinging as a political tool, how audiences read these performances and what they do with these messages remains uncertain. We are caught in somewhat of a bind if performances outside of queer spaces can’t be read/understood and therefore are politically ineffective, but if we also contend that because our audiences are complicit inside queer spaces, our political message may also be irrelevant. It’s not an issue that has a tidy resolution. Within this bind, it’s important to remember, that queer spaces and queer culture are not always politically homogenous or static. There are plenty of intra-community tensions. Although generally more accepting than public spaces, drag spaces are not immune to the racism, ableism, classism, misogyny, and transphobia that pervades mainstream cultural spaces. We also shouldn’t overlook the continued importance of constituency audiences in supporting and co-creating new cultural meanings and social agency, which necessarily requires, however risky, “an active kernel of utopian possibility” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 25). But more importantly, coming together and creating counterpublics is part of how minorities survive and part of how change can take place (Muñoz, 1999).

## Interlude Two—Queer Unicorns<sup>78</sup>



**Image 50: Queer Unicorns in downtown Edmonton (Jasper Avenue & 95 Street), 2012,  
photo by Shirl Tse**

Ben Sover and Ponyboi have performed our Queer Unicorns in public space and in queer performative spaces. Our gay-queer-faggy unicorns are about magic, adventures, attending to bodily urges, fun, wildness, consent, power, riding backsides, and being part of a herd. They can be found on the stage, at parties, or running around in downtown Edmonton parking lots. These little pony-daddies like playing with power and audience participation. They often gallop and hop through space (Image 51), frequently stopping out of curiosity to smell and touch things (and maybe hump things, too). In safely queer performance spaces,

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<sup>78</sup> A version of this section was originally published in “Drag kinging with Ben & Pony,” a photo-essay published in a special issue, “Gender and Theatre at the Margins,” in *alt.theatre: Cultural Diversity and the Stage* (Meyer, 2014).

these ponies like to be ridden by their fellow queers. And those queers seem to really like stroking unicorn horns! Sometimes these unicorns are docile and easily ridden; other times they like to “top from the bottom.” But because they are very visibly homo, genderconfusing, and somewhat inappropriately dressed, these ponies don’t always feel safe in public. They are simultaneously flamboyant and vulnerable in



**Image 51: Queer Unicorns in downtown Edmonton (Jasper Avenue & 95 Street), 2012, photo by Shirl**

**Tse**

public spaces. These queer creatures represent and re-create temporary spaces of transgression where we can embrace deviant sexual expressions and different kinds of kink. Ideally, we can put these on display and not

feel ashamed, but empowered, in both public and purposefully queer spaces. But as I discuss in Chapter Six, public space is a risky proposition for a flaming cross-dressed unicorn.



**Image 52: Queer Unicorns in downtown Edmonton (Jasper Avenue & 95 Street), 2012, photo by Shirl**

**Tse**

## Chapter Six—Invitation to Transgress: Experimentation and Playing with Power in Drag King

### Spaces

Liminality is particularly conducive to play. Play is not to be restricted to games and jokes; it extends to the introduction of new forms of symbolic action, such as word games or masks. In short, parts of liminality may be given over to experimental behavior. Here I mean by ‘experiment’ any action or process undertaken to discover something not yet known. . . . In liminality, new ways of acting, new combination of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted. (Turner, 1992, p. 52)

I feel like in the community it [drag kinging] feels like this place of fun and experimentation, and especially back when we were just getting into it in the 90s in Edmonton, where no one was doing it, it was very new. And you know, . . . it was a time of change. We were all starting to embrace this word, Queer, and it didn’t just mean gay. Or whatever. It meant making anything. It meant questioning anything that had been established as normal, and poking at the cracks of it to show that nothing is normal, and everyone’s weird, we’re all queer. Embrace it, change it, fight for it. And queer theory was a new exciting thing in the 90’s. And so, at these times of change, social change especially, there are these spaces that grow up out of it, that are. . . . exciting, they’re rife with possibility. And I think that’s why those spaces became spaces where people could embrace identity a little bit more, and their expression. (Jack Strap)

Freedom to play and explore is a fundamental feature of liminal phenomena. Liminal drag spaces not only provide space for play, but they also encourage illicit, subversive kinds of experimentation. In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which drag kings use specific performance/theatre practices such as costume, prop, mimicry, parody, name-changes, and body comportment. In doing so, I demonstrate how these elements of play and experimentation function as disidentificatory strategies where kings negotiate the complexities of articulating gendered agency while sometimes simultaneously enacting and critiquing hegemonic forms of masculinity. When talking about drag kinging, for example, Colin Ize recalls that “me being a trans individual, I was experimenting with certain gender presentations and how I felt presenting them on stage;” but they also talk about how they enjoyed doing their cowboy number “because Alberta is very very steeped in that stereotype, and it was really fun to make fun of it and queer it up.” For them and other kings, drag was both a political outlet for critiquing masculinity but also a fun way “to discover and then rediscover my gender . . . as well as other ways of making other parts of my identity fit in there” (Colin Ize). In this chapter, I ask how do kings negotiate the complex desires in personifying that which they also wish to

critique? What are the consequences, for example, of embodying and performing misogyny on stage? And what are the produced effects of accessing male power through drag performance? In the following, I analyze these critical questions to demonstrate how kings “work on and against” dominant conceptions of masculinity; by doing so, they both critique hegemonic masculinity and create their own subjectivities in performance and everyday life. As we will see, kinging is not only a liberatory and disidentificatory mode of cultural production but also a conformist and potentially dangerous performative intervention.

### **Drag King Performance Practices**

The performance frame of kinging allowed participants to be someone different—to celebrate entering into the embodiment of someone they are not in their everyday life, even if that embodiment wasn’t someone they would ever wish to be. In their interview-based study, “Liminality and the Transgender Experience,” Dentice and Dietert (2015) argue that liminal experiences contrast the rigidity of the gender binary; they argue that “liminality . . . is guided by symbolic rituals” and that “liminal experience gives transgender individuals the freedom to transcend structural constraints and to refashion their identities” (p. 76). While drag isn’t necessarily their focus, they highlight the importance of symbolic rituals in “opening up possibilities” for transformation and “refashioning” gender identity and expression. In doing so, these rituals often reveal the symbolic and performative nature of gender itself.

Kings refashion themselves with costume and props including dress, facial/body hair and facial contouring, wigs, and packing (e.g., with socks, fruit, strap-ons, codpieces); they also play with bodily comportment and name changing. As Phoenix’s story illustrates, for example, kings often workshopped masculinized bodily comportments (typically white masculinity, with a few exceptions) such as walking with less hip movement, taking up more space, and manspreading. They also practiced faggy masculine walks that emphasized hip sways and wrist flares (Ponyboi) and walking in heels (queening). While for some, changing dress for drag kinging was simply sprucing up their already masculine wardrobe of jeans and flannels, for others, it meant embodying different kinds of masculine dress such as cowboy hats, shit kickers, huge belt

buckles, and 1970s bell bottoms. Kings experimented with hair on their faces, arms, legs, and chest, and with wigs to appear more masculine, sometimes in a hyperbolized fashion. They specifically played with facial contouring and shading to create stronger jawlines and brow ridges. In addition, kings experimented with binding breasts with various kinds of tape, tensor bandages, and binders, as well as packing with socks and other implements.

Such experimentation and refashioning reveals some of the specific performative and disidentificatory practices kings use to articulate gendered agency. Muñoz conceptualizes disidentification as a kind of identity assertion or creation where we don't simply reproduce the mainstream, but we rework and reconfigure those mainstream cultural symbols and codes to recreate identities with difference. Within this process of unpacking and dismantling, disidentificatory practices call into question dominant cultural codes and oppressive institutional practices that limit the scope of our agency, but these codes may also provide the means—the language and symbols—for which we rearticulate our identities/subjectivities. Our agency, or our capacity to act and make choices, is always mitigated by the particular contexts and environments we find ourselves within. Disidentificatory performative practices are about “reformulating the world through the politics of performance” (Muñoz, 1999, p. xiv).

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (p. 31)

As a conceptual tool, a performative technique, *and* a survival strategy, disidentification offers a way to understand not only the political and personal significance of queer performative acts but it also offers a way to understand the confusing terrain in which queers of all races work “on and against dominant ideology.”

Muff E. Ohso, for example, initially styled his drag character after big trucker guys that was made from his “favourite things from ‘guyness’: truck driver handlebar mustache and huge pork chop sideburns.” In later iterations, his drag character transformed from “redneck guy to more KGB guy, so he was still big,

tough, but he skewed Eastern European, which I am.” Muff also morphed his character from “everything he was afraid of” into a softer masculinity with a “heart of gold”; in this transformation, we can observe how Muff used disidentificatory practices by co-opting the stereotypical Albertan cowboy type of costume and reworking him into a character who was less dangerous and more relatable. Other kings worked with costume and props to create looks that worked “on and against” hegemonic masculinity. Niles Jupiter, part of Queer Royale, donned a steampunk style man with ruffled shirts, top hats, tail coats, and goggles (Images 53 & 54). Niles’ version of masculinity was not lacking in suave-ness or hairiness, but his masculinity was also soft and somewhat effeminate. Jack Strap was an effeminate and skinny boy-ish king. He described himself as a “nerdy Jewish intellectual” who usually sported sideburns and a soul patch. Other kings worked more directly with adjusting their actions to find middle ground between total assimilation and resistance to hegemonic masculinity and misogyny. As Phoenix’s journal (Appendix A) describes, one of their characters was originally quite creepy, and through costume design would often have huge bulges under his tight pants and/or end up pant-less as part of his act; sometimes he solicited audiences to touch his crotch. In working on and against this dominant kind of slime-ball masculinity, they eventually started asking, “If he’s going to be creepy, is there a way he can be creepy but consensual?” It’s interesting to note that they wanted to *keep* the creepy part of their character, illustrating a disidentificatory strategy that was neither a “bold-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 108). Ponyboi’s faggy boi masculinity illustrates another example of playing with costume as a disidentificatory strategy, more specifically here for asserting social agency. In reworking some of the cultural codes of hegemonic (hetero) masculinity such as facial hair, overconfidence, and taking up a lot of space, Ponyboi fashioned his masculinity with rainbow suspenders, daddy-boi leather hats, bright red lipstick, and a small black soul patch of hair on his chin. His overconfidence and space-hogging manifests in flaming and flamboyant gayness rather than stiff and stoic manliness (Image 56).



Image 53: Queer Royale: Niles Jupiter, Ponyboi, Ben Sover, and Colin Ize, photo by Shirl Tse



Image 54: Niles Jupiter, photo by Shirl Tse



**Image 55: Ben Sover, photo by Shirl Tse**



**Image 56: Ponyboi's faggy hands, photo by Shirl Tse**

Kings also employ another effective and reliable performative theatrical intervention—changing one's name—which also functions as a disidentificatory strategy. In the spirit of drag, most interviewees' king names are some kind of play on words or double entendre (e.g., Ben Sover, Muff E. Ohso, Jack Strap, Justin Time, Mac U. More, Mr. Pee Puddles). Some were explicit expressions of a particular kind of masculinity that they wanted to project, either for their own personal gender expressions (Lil' Mack, Ponyboi) or for comedic/performance purposes (Rusty Nails, Randy Packer, Oscar de la Hymen). Lil' Mack comments that they wanted “the smallness to also be equated with masculinity so that size could also be understood through a masculine lens. To be masculine you didn't have to just be big.” Here we see an example of a king working on and against the importance of size or stature in creating their own masculine self-expression. My drag name, Ponyboi, eventually became my everyday name, Pony; this example illustrates how experimenting with

inhabiting a new name can not only work to articulate gendered agency in performance but also lead to identity changes in everyday contexts. Others used their name for political expression; Colin Ize, for instance, says that the first iteration of his name, The Scholar, “was very pretentious and very much a characterization of a white gay male taking up space.” His name developed into Colin Ize after writing a paper about colonial thought: “I wasn’t as radical with my politics when I started originally. And now I’m all about decolonization—through drag, which is part of the reason I chose that name. To sort of make a caricature on hegemonic masculinity.” Here we see Colin engaging in a form of mimicry in which he reproduces a model of maleness (or masculinity).



**Image 57: Colin Ize, photo by Shirl Tse**

On stage, kings also focus specifically on queer sex and desire in their disidentificatory practices; these practices reflect real-life negotiations and tensions around desire in queer communities. In both

performance and everyday worlds, queers absorb and reshape dominant ideas, symbols, and practices of sex/desire, creating something that is our own, something “rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). We can observe a significant example of this disidentification in the ways kings mimic and parody masculinity (and/or maleness) through the use of the well-known theatrical trope: the cod-piece. The crotch, in both theatre and dress history, has historically been a huge area of focus. Drag kinging is no exception. No drag king show will be found wanting of phallic symbolism. As Escudero Alías (2009) contends, “the recirculation and reterritorialization of this ‘privileged signifier’ is a predominant feature in most drag king’s performance” (p. 181). In playing with packing, kings displayed and pulled all manner of items from their crotch. Ben Sover was especially fond of packing a hard-rolled duct-taped sock in very tight pants. Ponyboi liked to end his boilesque numbers with a swinging cock tassel reveal. Queer Royale’s Fab ‘n’ Fruity Fitness featured a number of crotch-thrusting moves and protruding packages. The Alberta Beef had a BDSM number where significant focus was directed toward thrusting crotches above submissive bottoms (Image 58).



**Image 58: Alberta Beef Backstage, mid 2000s**

In our duet number, “Do You Take It?”<sup>79</sup> Stuffy-White-Femme donned a surprise (i.e., reveal) strap-on beneath her dress and then simulated anal sex with Proper-White-Gent. In this performance, we recycled the dominant image of the phallus via a strap-on donned by a femme to disidentify with and reimagine heterosexist protocols for penetrative sex. What we wanted to do politically with this piece, at least to start, was to suggest that female attire and bodies/people with vaginas do not signal “penile penetration opportunities.” Further disruption of heteronormative frameworks involves rejecting the false conflation of a penis with a man, with masculinity, with power, and with dominance. We offer this suggestion with our strap-on reveal in live performance and in the positioning of our bodies in photographs. In Image 59, for example, PWG is positioned lower than WSF; and in Image 60, WSF is taking PWG from behind. Escudero-Alías says using dildos as props in king performances, “signifies certain lesbian practices” and also functions as “parodic appropriation as a substitute for the male penis” (Escudero-Alías, 2009, p. 182). She calls this transference of symbolic power controversial (read: penis envy). She’s not wrong. In other words, does the

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<sup>79</sup> Original song “Do You Take It?” by musical comedy duo: The Wet Spots (<http://www.wetspotsmusic.com/>).



**Image 59: White-Stuffy-Femme and Proper-White-Gent at Louise McKinney Riverfront Park,  
Edmonton, 2012, photo by Shirl Tse**



**Image 60: White-Stuffy-Femme and Proper-White-Gent at Louise McKinney Riverfront Park,  
Edmonton, 2012, photo by Shirl Tse**

fact that lesbians use dildos in performance (or sex) mean they wish they had penises? Of course not. But also, so what if they do want them? In any case, in the contexts of drag kings, I tend to agree with Escudero-Álías in that even if seemingly contradictory, the uses of such props are playful, funny, and quite often attempts at parody that highlight the fact that you don't have to be a cisgender man to be a top or to exercise other forms of power (p. 182). In Rosenfeld's psychoanalysis of accessing phallic power, she contends that

Much of the punch and potency of drag kings is that they represent that unattainable other side of the chasm of queer female desire: they enable the possibility of admitting queergirl desire for the phallus. Women who feel powerful when they pack a dildo and strut out into the evening, and women who lust after them, both manifest this desire. In other words, the complicated desire invoked by drag kings is desire for the self and desire for the other. This formulation mostly understands 'the phallus' literally, but articulated in psychoanalytic terms, desire for the phallus becomes desire for power—for the sexual agency available to the socio-sexual center. (2002, pp. 208–209)

Moreover, these kinds of disidentificatory strategies offer a way of understanding how queers and queer performers work on and against dominant ideologies/structures to both expose these structures as oppressive and to open up new worlds where queers have social and individual agency. By circulating in subcultural contexts, we could argue that these “disidentificatory identity performances,” or “emergent identities-in-difference” work to “envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5). However, we could also argue that it's actually quite difficult to differentiate between disidentificatory acts on stage and ones that merely reproduce misogyny on stage. What are the consequences, for example, of embodying (even if also parodying) the overly aggressive, the asshole, the slime ball, the macho, or the sexy, muscular, confident, and powerful heterosexual cisgender man? What are the implications of accessing male power on stage and how do kings negotiate this power? I explore these critical questions in the following and final section of this chapter.

### **Desire, Identity, and Safety: The Implications of Accessing Male Power**

How can we know the dancer from the dance? (W.B. Yeats, n.d.)

Norms always masquerade as non-choices, and when we suggest that for example, resisting sexism means everyone should look androgynous, or resisting racism means no one should modify the

texture of their hair, we foreclose people's abilities to expose the workings of fucked up systems on their bodies as they see fit. (Spade, 2002)

Unpacking some of the excessive focus on hegemonic and toxic masculinity within drag kinging reveals an odd kind of obsession or anxiety around male power. For many Albertan drag kings, experimentation meant accessing male power in new and uncomfortable ways. As Phoenix's journal (Appendix A) demonstrates, this often led to intra-personal negotiation and self-reflection for many kings in terms of how they might have internalized various iterations of toxic masculinity and/or how they interacted with others while embodying said masculinities. Muff E. Ohso comments that while his character was made from his "favourite things from 'guyness,'" his character was also "in a way everything [he] was afraid of." Like other kings, Lil' Mack understands that "masculinity . . . is also dangerous, or can be, particularly in terms of some of the cultural constructions around it." Phoenix's story illustrates that for many kings, accessing this power was experienced sometimes as a mix of longing and confusion, or even identification with that which participants sought to parody and critique (Appendix A). Rusty Nails described these experiences as "accessing power that had been withheld" and Al talks about their "slimy dude" characters (Al Wangs & GynBro Al) who both seem to be "a parody of that [cultural] stereotype of the 'player' type." Colin Ize says of their Alberta cowboy number with Queer Royale that they changed their movements to be "more clunky-ish. Like, making myself appear bigger than I usually am. And that felt kind of weird, because usually I'm not entitled to doing that." Al also talks about feeling a "liberating quality of confidence and ownership of space that I don't get to feel that often in my actual life." Although this ownership isn't something they want to enact in real life, these kinds of performative acts spark considerable self-reflection. We might think of these experiences as disidentificatory sites in which kings had to negotiate absorbing and resisting dominant structures of masculinity. And within these sites, the access to male power brings new and potentially risky kinds of experimentation. In this section, I analyze why we are drawn to these character tropes and the potential insights and effects we might learn and observe from such enactments.

In many drag king stories, we can observe a tension between experimenting with something that feels thrilling but also dangerous—a tension between critiquing and longing for toxic/hegemonic masculinity through performative enactments. As several kings shared, there is something therapeutic about enacting

hegemonic masculinities. As Mac U. More explains, “I think there is a certain attraction to enact things that might have hurt us before. But also, there could be a certain power in doing it, although it depends on who is at the other end. A power in kind of re-enacting something you’re afraid of.” Here we see quite explicitly how the queer liminal spaces of drag kinging produce transformative and empowering effects on interviewees. As Boal (1979) and others have contended, performance/theatre allows participants to express and work through significant and deeply-rooted psychological processes. “It was good,” Rusty Nails says, “to take this very serious cowboy role and just like, knowing that they’d be totally upset with what we were doing with them.” It truly is great fun to take the piss out of one’s oppressor and to “make your displeasure known” (Rusty Nails). There is “some amount of making fun of masculinity, obviously, like when I talk about ‘failing’ at masculinity, as being deconstructive, it is poking fun,” as Jack Strap says. Torr and Bottoms (2010) describe Shelly Mars’ experiences of performing her creepy male character, Martin, in a similar way: “As an adult, she [Shelly Mars] also found that mimicking predatory males could function cathartically as a means of appropriating and queering the ostensible ‘sexiness’ with which aggressive masculinity is often invested by the mainstream” (p. 119). In this way, we could argue that the therapeutic power in such enactments seems to be about exorcising experiences of systemic sexism. Similarly, Rosenfeld (2002) employs the theory of liminality to demonstrate how drag kings engage in social magic “by traversing states of being and boundaries between mutually constructing others” (p. 201); she shows how play and ritual allow performers to express potentiality and longing and to “mitigate and counterbalance the dominance of the socially powerful” (p. 207).

But what of drag king audiences? How does one ensure that the potential trauma/violence that kings experience through being on the receiving end of hegemonic masculinity (or systemic sexism) is not experienced by another person at the hands of the king therapeutically enacting said masculinity? Here we see the true potential of liminality to be both threatening and liberating as well as reconfirming. The experimental theatre space allows for risk-taking that can feel freeing for performers but also creates uncertainty and the possibility of danger, particularly in light of what we know hegemonic masculinity to be capable of. There is an element of risk, for example, when we can no longer tell the difference between the character and the

performer or when we become unsure if the performance is still a *performance*. In other words, when the doubleness of the performance starts to disappear, we see a more precarious space emerge.<sup>80</sup> And if that performance revels in the celebration of a cultural stereotype of an aggressive man, it's fair to say audiences could start to feel unsafe, particularly considering the constituent audience. Alternatively, audiences might also feel pissed off, ripped off, or just flat-out bored. We could argue that drag show audiences come in with expectations to see exaggerated forms of gender on stage. That's not to say that performances need to be enjoyed uncritically without political commentary or that there are no creative or aesthetic standards for drag. And certainly, audiences shouldn't be expected to sit through *any* gender performance on stage. However, audience interaction and a sense of irreverence have always been staple traits of drag, at least for drag queens. And at times, these characteristics of drag can push people's personal boundaries. But are these accurate expectations for a drag king show? Perhaps. However, I argue that Albertan kings (and perhaps kings more generally when compared to queens) engage in a number of consent-oriented practices and self-reflections that attempt to mitigate threats of misogyny.

Indeed, there were some consequences to embodying an asshole character. As Justin Time points out, "misogyny can really easily enter drag spaces . . . [such as] playing out stereotypical male/female power

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<sup>80</sup> When we see artists start to break the frameworks, rules, and conventions of the form, we move away from just a liminal experience of a relatively safe "in-betweenness" and toward something potentially more threatening. We can think of this movement from liminal into a more liminoid terrain. Importantly, because drag kinging has the potential to enter the liminoid, we can sometimes observe an interesting tension for performers, particularly in terms of accessing male power, safety, and risk. In other words, when audiences no longer know if kinging is still performance or not, the stakes are inevitably raised. It's the insecurity about this distinction that produces the liminoid affect.

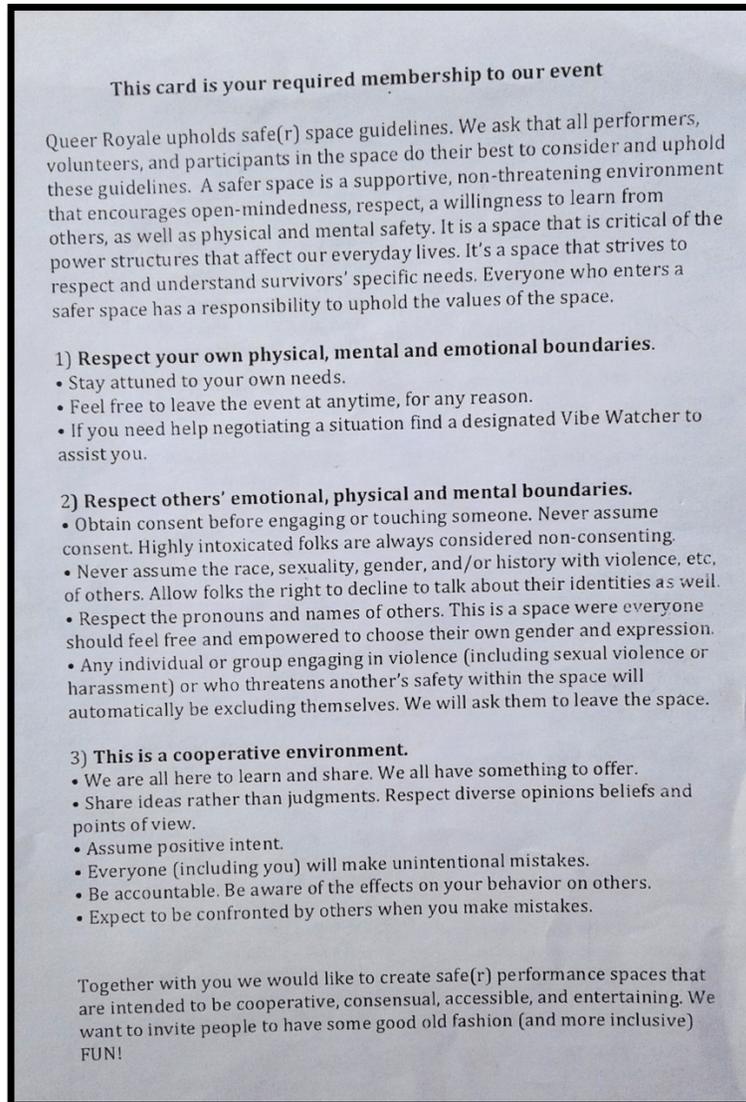
relations on stage.” But is it *bad* if misogyny enters the space if it’s performed or represented? Justin Time says that “[misogyny] wasn’t ever anything that I wanted to explore or represent. So perhaps [I was] informed by a feminist lens of some kind. I think any future drag that I do would also be informed more by anti-oppression lenses too.” Lil’ Mack talks about being aware that certain enactments of masculinity can be dangerous and that “maybe that’s why I kept some of that under wraps, or didn’t feel like I embodied that kind of jerk persona in the same way that other people may have identified with that. . . . I really didn’t want to carry around that kind of masculinity, so when the show was over I would often wipe off my facial hair . . . I would stay in the clothes that I performed in, [but] after [performing] it was just friends hanging out at a bar, I didn’t want to be interpreted or seen as that persona.” Ponyboi, Ben Sover, and Mac U. More embodied different kinds of masculinity (e.g., faggy masculinity and bisexuality) rather than heteromascularity. This is not to say that just because these are minority masculinities that they are not capable of enacting violence and chauvinism, but we do see different kinds of bodily comportment (e.g., loose wrists and hip sways) and queer kinds of romantic and sexual love on stage (e.g., daddy-boi). For those kings who did enact the common trope of hegemonic masculinity quite deliberately, they also engaged in self-reflection and/or debriefing with their drag troupe (e.g., Ponyboi, Ben Sover, Al, Mac U. More, Randy Packer, Rusty Nails, Muff E. Ohso). As discussed earlier, kings also employ parody as a performative strategy—not only for comedic and entertainment purposes, but also as a political strategy that in some ways mitigates the potential dangers of performing hegemonic masculine tropes/traits (e.g., threatening swagger, crotch grabbing, taking up a lot of space, being an asshole, misogyny).

Of course, we can’t ensure what audiences do or feel, but we can observe that Albertan kings engaged in self-reflection (and subsequent change) and consent-oriented practices, perhaps either informed by a feminist lens or lived-experience.

I think drag kings tend to interact with audiences more in a direct level that isn’t like assaulting the audience. . . . I know some people love it when drag queens . . . like grab your head and smash it into their tits, stuff like that and you’re sitting in the audience like, okay, \*laughter,\* and they just take over in this very different, it’s a very different feel. . . . [I]t’s not like it doesn’t happen [with drag kings], but on the whole, if you’re going to do something really aggressive, you often plant someone

in the audience to have that interaction with; the audience doesn't know they're a plant, but you know they consented to whatever you're going to do. So, I think there's a heightened awareness of consensual participation to an extent when compared to queens. And I think that's just a societal thing; I think queens get away with it, frankly, and we just let them. And I think boys, drag kings—especially people who are in the female-assigned-at-birth category already come to 'consent in participation,' and especially physical touch in a very different way and so the development of boundaries around that is very different. (James Dean)

Although consensual participation is a general premise of theatre, perhaps in most theatre we don't necessarily expect to be verbally assaulted or physical groped (depending on performance, venue, and genre). Indeed, queens have been known to do a fair amount of groping and they may really lay into an audience member in a sometimes-mean-spirited way. James Dean points out the "heightened awareness" of consensual participation in comparison with kings and gestures toward consent specifically in regard to sexual touch. Queer Royale also developed explicit strategies in their performance and organizing practices in order to mitigate the safety factors around consent and performative enactments of masculinity. For example, we created our "Safer Space guidelines" (Appendix K) and modified JAC Stringer's (2011) "Tips for creating Safe(r) Spaces while Performing" (Appendix L) to use as guidelines in our community endeavours. We also distributed these guidelines to performers who performed in our shows and posted them at the shows we organized (at entrances and throughout the space). In relation to consent, for example, some of these guidelines gave advice on respecting personal boundaries and touch.



**Image 61: Safer Space Guidelines at *QHE*, 2014**

We could also argue that drag kinging has a specific constituency audience that further diminishes the risk factors associated with experimentations of masculinity. To fully grasp the reception of king experimentations, we would need to understand audiences' perceptions, experiences, and responses to these performances. Of course, their responses are difficult to gauge, especially because I didn't interview audiences. Generally speaking, however, drag kings view their relationship with their audiences as mutually beneficial. Drag kings want to connect with their audiences—they want validation and applause, and they

want them to grasp the political implications of their performances. Kings may challenge gendered norms in performance, but to a large degree, they also assume a certain literacy around subversion of gender and sexuality norms:

I assume our audiences are pretty critical minded . . . as well? So, [I imagine] they would continue to explore, question constructions of masculinity. So, to not see these things at biological, but as products. And one of our original troupe members, LJ Steele, was biologically male but also did drag, and it was just another [way] in which I think we were really fucking with masculinity and forms of masculinity. (Lil' Mack)

Alternatively, Colin Ize says of the OUTreach show:

[that] it's good for them to learn some politics . . . and to see something that's different from the misogynistic terrible drag that happens. . . . It's a very mutually beneficial relationship between the audience and the performer in drag. Because you want to know that what you're presenting, they will take back and process it in a good way. And sort of reflect that in the way that they treat you after the performance.

There's also the observation that constituency audiences often go wild for these kinds of masculine enactments. Importantly, as Rosenfeld claims, king performances can in many ways give performative voice to queer desire (2002). Mac U. More talks about

[having] the body that I have but then being able to like you know bind my tits and put on this faux facial hair and then strut around in a completely different way. Also having that validated. I love that there's like a bunch of ladies losing their shit at our performance on Saturday (laughing), for like that particular expression and representation of myself that you don't see getting a lot of love for in the mainstream media.

But it's sometimes difficult to distinguish between parodying or mocking masculinity and being enamored by that same expression. How do we make such a distinction, and why might it be important to do so? It's not an easily resolved tension. Much research on drag kinging has attempted to draw similar distinctions between challenging or re-inscribing hegemonic masculinity and binary gender categories (Troka, Noble, & LeBesco, 2002). Perhaps it's important to cultivate some self-awareness around this tension as a performer so you don't literally become an asshole. It may also be the liminal performative space itself that allows performers (and audiences) to acceptably hold two contradictory impulses in tandem. Torr and Bottoms (2013) rightly say that "cross-dressing may be experienced both as a form of sexual empowerment for the performer *and* as a site of fetishistic desire for the spectator" (p. 121). Here, we might understand this sentiment as both the desire of

the performer to be seen/observed by an audience, and perhaps for an audience who fetishizes cross-dressing. For kings, there's something about the display of power in the swagger—the sex appeal for spectators.

Similarly, as Justin Time explains, “the queer community [has] always been a chance for us to play out sexual fantasies, and you know, things that we can't maybe do on the outside of this theatre space... I think it's this process of wanting . . . or finding people physically attractive or wanting to be them. So yeah. It's a fantasy maybe.” Accessing phallic power in particular in drag king contexts seems to be about both sexual desire and desire for masculine gender expression. In all of this, we see the tensions between desire and repulsion; a longing to embody but also to critique. We see the “in-between-ness” (or liminality) that characterizes drag kings who “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Similarly, Bobbie Nobel expresses this performative liminality space where “drag kings are situated in and play with the ironic *no man's land* between 'lesbian,' 'butch,' 'transman,' and 'bio-boy' where the self-evident is neither” (2002, p. 251).

Of course, drag king performance, as a liminal mode of cultural production, doesn't exist in a vacuum; it doesn't exist outside of culture or social structure but within the fissures and ruptures of social structure itself (Turner, 1969, 1982a). As Spade (2002) writes,

there is no 'outside'—none of us can stand fully outside . . . racism, sexism and see what is going on. Instead we stand within and are constituted by these practices and forces, and we form our resistance there, always having to struggle against forces within ourselves, correcting our blind spots, learning from one another. So of course, our aesthetic resistance should do the same.

In this way, theorizing drag king experimentation means understanding the messy relationship between resistance and assimilation because “even as polymorphous sexuality is alive and resisting, such resistance always occurs in relation to dominating and dominant discourses” (Filax, 2006, p. 32). The tension between longing for and critiquing hegemonic masculinity makes more sense when we understand that, although sometimes performers co-opt dominant paradigms and statuses, disidentification, like passing, it is neither about overt opposition or overt resistance to existing ideologies. While kings work to critique the dominant

paradigms of gender (i.e., natural attitude, gender essentialism, hegemonic masculinity), they may also simultaneously be working to find their own gender and political expression within a patriarchal and white supremacist world. Muñoz (1999) contends that we can create spaces for queer subjects to articulate social agency. That's what occurs in the liminal space of drag kinging, even if done so in an explicitly playful way(s) that seem to blur the line between re-inscribing and re-imagining hegemonic masculinity. Disidentificatory practices aren't straightforward or neat processes. They are

A way out of the vicious cycle of either ceding to domination or becoming a part of a factious resistance, while acknowledging how difficult it is to not fall into either trap. It is to learn to make peace within our (e.g. queer, people of color, women) 'multiple antagonisms within the social' as a way to find empowerment. (Chávez, 2014, p. 151)

In these experimental spaces, kings have the freedom and opportunity to not only deconstruct masculinity, but also to contribute to the construction of masculinity, an act of agency that many non-biologically-male people have consistently been denied. Kinging offers a revisionary way of identification in that it offers "different strategies of viewing, reading, and locating 'self' within representational systems and disparate life-worlds that aim to displace or occlude a minority subject" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 26). Of course, we must also be careful not to inflate the potential of drag kinging to undermine hegemonic constructions of patriarchal power and suppression simply by playing with them on stage. To be sure, this is not my message. While we might not see drag kings directly affecting systemic change, we do see the practice as a site for personal transformation, self-reflection, and support in the lives of many gender and sexual minorities. And while we can't say for sure what audiences take from these performances, we can say that many performers have used the liminal and reflective spaces of drag to cultivate and express their queer politics and subjectivities.



## Conclusion

This study has documented and analyzed the experiences of drag kings over a 30-year time span in the distinctly socially-conservative environment of Alberta. I began this project aiming to understand the role of drag kinging in the lives of these Albertan kings and how/why this performance genre offered space for gender experimentation. After a few interviews, I observed that the experiences of self-discovery, gender validation, and increased confidence were consistently surfacing. And so I questioned further – what is it about these specific performative practices and the relations among the people in drag king spaces that facilitates these kinds of experiences? To this end, this dissertation has demonstrated how drag kinging functions as liminal performance where kings have a safe space to experiment with the cultural practices of gender in front of mostly generous and supportive constituency audiences. In fact, it's the specific relationship between drag king performers and their constituency audiences that creates these experiences of safety/gender validation and the potential for reimagining the communicative functions of gender.

These kinds of experiences contrast greatly with those of gender and sexual minorities in everyday life. This dissertation gives insight into the ways in which the natural attitude negatively affects gender and sexual minorities; it also demonstrates how drag kinging can potentially re-imagine both the natural attitude and the communicative function of gender on which much gender-based violence is grounded. However, as I've also illustrated, we must be careful not to overvalue the liberatory potential of drag kinging. Without a critical lens, the form has equal potential to reproduce hegemonic masculinity, racism, and misogyny. Importantly for this project, we might also observe how the definition of gender continues to transform in both mainstream and subcultural contexts. For example, in his recent book, *The look of a woman: facial feminization surgery and the aims of trans-medicine*, Eric Plemons (2017) argues that gender now is defined through social appearance to a much greater degree than genital status. Like Bettcher (2007), Plemons begins from the same theoretical premise that gender/sex is structurally/socially defined and experienced; or in his interviewees' words, "to be a woman . . . was to be recognized and treated as a woman in the course of everyday life" (p. 2). However, Plemons' work is an ethnographic/historical divergence from Bettcher, and to

some degree, it's also a theoretical challenge in the sense that Plemons conceptualizes sex as something that exists across the whole body (specifically faces) and that facial feminization surgery (FFS) can be understood as “transform[ing] patients’ bodily sex” (p. 2). He argues that this conceptualization has started to gain currency for trans women and within trans medicine. While I’ve observed this shift to social appearance within some queer and trans specific communities, it’s not one that I’ve observed in broader social contexts in Canada and the U.S. in regard to accessing healthcare and legal documents. Nonetheless, Plemons’ work has interesting implications for understanding the communicative functions of gender and could prove useful for future work on understanding gender-based violence and what gender freedom might look like.

This dissertation also sought to investigate what kinds of transformations or realizations about identity and masculinity take place through drag king performance and why these might occur. On this front, we can observe how interviewees negotiate the complex layers of identity, politics, and desire. Enacting and performing masculinities on stage often led to realizations about internalized misogyny; interviewees went through a number of intra-personal negotiations and self-reflections to understand what it meant to embody a toxic version of masculinity. Working with Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, this research demonstrates how kings work on and against hegemonic masculinity to both cultivate their own gendered subjectivities and to expose gender-based violence and sexism. I show further how embodying toxic masculinities therapeutically exorcises experiences of systemic sexism through parody and humor.

For my last research question, I sought to understand the connections and/or tensions between drag kinging and transgender communities. Overall, this research demonstrates that drag kinging offers a safe space for non-binary and trans people to express masculinity, particularly for people considering gender transitioning. The performative frame of the stage; the community support of constituency audiences and drag troupes; and the opportunity to play with masculine movements, name changing, facial hair, packing, and binding made this kind of space possible. This research also addressed some of the primary critiques of drag in order to explore how kinging (and queening) might further marginalize trans people and trans communities. In doing so, I argue that drag performers and MCs have the responsibility to reflect on their use

of transphobic and sexist language and on how their performances might rely on the juxtaposition of their sexed body and gender presentation for comedic purposes.

### **Limitations to Research**

There were a number of limitations in this research. First, the sample of interviewees could have been more diverse in terms of types of kinging, era of kinging, and gender identity. For example, I would've liked to have interviewed a few more people from the Fly Bastards (1990s) to get a more holistic picture of drag kinging during this time. I think the inclusion of more drag kings who perform with the Court would also have helped to give a broader understanding of kinging in Edmonton. However, the additional kings I contacted from the Fly Bastards and the Court didn't follow through with setting up an interview. In terms of gender identity, I would've liked to have interviewed more trans kings to get a broader perspective on the intersections between drag kinging and trans subjectivities.

The second limitation was time and energy, specifically in terms of doing more interviews. Follow-up interviews would have allowed me to follow-up on emerging themes and with additional questions that investigate the intersection of gender, class, and race. Relatedly, I was not able to interview audiences in this project. Although I initially proposed interviewing audiences, I found that the scope of interviewing both performers and audiences was too large for the timeframe of this dissertation.

### **Future Research**

Drawing on insights from this study, future researchers might investigate the specific experiences of drag king *audiences* to further understand the role that constituency audiences play in these spaces. To this end, researchers might ask audiences about their reception of particular enactments of masculinity and their perspectives on drag kinging as a political tool as well as the communicative function of gender. Secondly, given the current debates between drag queens and some trans communities, future researchers might talk directly with these two groups to learn more about their perspectives and to facilitate meaningful dialogue

between them. A large amount of negative perceptions of drag queens emerged in my research; although I didn't explore this theme because this was outside the scope of my project, I think a contemporary feminist qualitative research project that engages with both queen performance and interviews with queens is needed to unpack the seemingly pervasive ideas around sexism and transphobia within queen culture.

### **What's Next for this Research Project?**

Doing auto-ethnographic and critical ethnographic work poses particular ethical challenges to researchers, especially those researchers who work with marginalized research participants and who position themselves as activists. We have ethical responsibilities to the people and communities with whom we study. As Madison suggests, we must continually ask ourselves these important questions: "What are we going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been? How will our work make a difference in people's lives?" (2005, p. 7). My ultimate goal for this study is to translate the knowledge and history gleaned from this research into a format that is accessible to the broader public (i.e., free or reasonably priced, accessible language, culturally valuable). This knowledge translation might take the form of one or more of the following: blog, website, zine, or book. Additionally, I would like to build upon the Gender, Movement, and Performance Workshop to create an applied model that other people could use for community facilitation with lgbttq+ youth and adults.

It is my hope that this research contributes to our understandings of drag king culture in North America, and specifically to the cultural archive of queer culture in Edmonton, Alberta. In addition to archival contributions, this study provides important theoretical insight into the ways in which the natural attitude negatively affects gender and sexual minorities, and how drag kinging offers the potential for re-imagining the communicative functions of gender. However, the normative goal of attaining gender freedom is always a contested project—although drag kings clearly have political motivations, the produced (political) effects of drag kinging—as indeed with any kind of performative articulation—aren't always clear or certain. What we might take away from this research is how necessarily messy articulating gendered agency can be for non-

binary and trans people, who work both within and against dominant ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality to cultivate their subjectivities. In this way, we can recognize the importance and value of community performance spaces like drag kinging which allow performers to negotiate those spaces of contradiction and in-betweenness.

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## Appendix A: Drag Journal

### Prologue

To represent some of the main collective, and unique, experiences of these drag kings in Alberta, I created a series of journal entries written by a composite character, Phoenix. The process of creating this journal involved several iterations of a composite narrative sketch which I then organized into a set of journal entries. I chose the journal genre because I felt this kind of creative representation allowed for a personal and self-reflective tone that captures some of the nature and tone of the interviewees' experiences doing drag. Dated entries also allowed me to cover a large span of time and to transform some of the stories into the present tense, which I think is more engaging and provides a sense of immediacy in the writing. This genre also allowed me to create more succinct, thematically-focused entries so that readers could better capture some of the key findings in the research. In order to share participants' stories in their own words as much as possible as well as to provide a cohesive, yet complex story, I have used material from interview transcripts combined with my own synthesis, analysis, and stylistic choices. These stories are interwoven together, combining all the participants' experiences, including my own. Although I have given the composite character a name—Phoenix—this journal doesn't come from or represent any *one* participant's exact experiences. The journal entries below detail the role of drag kinging in the lives of 19 drag kings who performed in Alberta from 1997 to 2016.

### Backstory

The following Drag Journal is written by a single character—Phoenix—who wrote the majority of these entries between the years 2000 and 2002 specifically to document and reflect on their experiences doing drag while going to university in Edmonton, Alberta. After university, the journal eventually ended up packed away in a box along with other sentimental photos and memorabilia. In 2015, after visiting their old drag buddies in Edmonton, they feel nostalgic about their drag days. When they return home to Vancouver, they dig through their closet to revisit and reread their journal, adding additional reflective entries.

## **Drag Journal**

**July 10, 2000**

Edmonton

Today I signed up for a free gender, movement, and performance workshop for this fall/winter that I heard about through a friend. I'm really looking forward to it because I've been really struggling with my gender and understanding all these conflicting desires and messages from everything around me. When I first came to university last year, as a baby queer, I felt like I didn't know anything. So, I decided to look for the rainbow flag at Clubs Fair. And then from there, all I knew was OUTreach. The OUTreach queers were mostly white cis gay males, and that's what I knew queer to be for a while. I've been feeling as if there wasn't a space for me because I feel like I don't really fit into either of the gender categories, like maybe I'm not really a lesbian but I'm not a gay man either. But recently this guy I know from OUTreach told me about this workshop and I'm starting to feel like there are options, possibilities. This makes me happy. I'm really hoping this will give me some support and community to help me explore gender in a safe environment ... and also to do art and hang out with queer friends.

**August 15, 2000**

Edmonton

I went to a drag show over the weekend back home with some friends. It wasn't in a gay bar because ... well there are no queer bars there. Typical Albertan small town. It was in a dive bar-ish thing, which was fun. But it was pretty hostile and scary. The show was great, but people were constantly watching their backs. Making sure they had someone to go with them to the bathroom and stuff like that. It was very, very restricted in terms of that. And after that show somebody burned a rainbow flag in the parking lot! It's intense up there.

Living in Edmonton is definitely a change from small towns. But even in Edmonton I wouldn't say it's always safe. People still glare at you if you look queer. A couple weeks ago I was walking down the street holding hands with my same-sex partner and we were followed by these two men who were making comments about what they would do to us. It was a Farmer's Market Saturday, so there were a lot of people all out on Whyte Ave just right out in the open, and they're harassing us very loud, and everyone can see them. But instead of looking at these men who are harassing us walking down the street, people directed their glares at us like we were causing a problem. I've also been spit on and even beaten up outside of The Roost. I feel like even in Edmonton it's the kind of place that you know, walking down the street, not conforming to gender norms and obviously heteronormativity, feels like a radical act. And this kind of stuff is what I've come to expect, maybe even what I'm starting to get used to ... though I suppose I will never really get used to it.

I'd love to be on the stage though. I love watching the queens up on stage down at the gay bar here in Edmonton. Sometimes I gaze lovingly at them donning their sequin gowns and over-the-top wigs and makeup and singing songs like "Don't you wish your girlfriend was hot like me!" Last weekend, one queen even did a back flip in heels! I love that shit. I get a little disappointed though when they get so drunk or seem to care so little that their version of lip-syncing is pretty much just moving their mouths up and down. Classic. But I'm usually getting pretty fucked up, too. I love a hot room full of drunk and rowdy fags. Some of my straight male friends say it smells like semen and butt sex in the club. I never really noticed. I love the drag shows and I love being packed into a space full of gays. When I watch some of those queens, I daydream about what I would do if I were up there. But I feel like I'm not butch enough. Plus there aren't really any dykes who perform. I've only seen one perform a few times. He usually does boy-band lip-synch covers and a lot of twirls. My friends have made bets on how many twirls he will do in an act. I guess you'd call him a drag king.

**January 6, 2001**

Edmonton

I Started the gender workshop last month and we have been doing some movement exercises and discussing a lot of stuff about queerness, sexuality, race, politics, and gender. We watched some clips of a drag king documentary and then decided to watch the full thing together at Manny Nutbush's place. It was fucking awesome!!

Our discussions so far have got me thinking a lot about masculinity. What does masculinity mean to me? I feel like I'm starting to confront a whole set of questions, implications, and relationships around masculinity, phalluses, shame, power, sexual abuse, machismo, violence, anger... I've been going to a lot of self-reflective places inside my mind. What kind of feminist and queer politics do I believe in? What is it about masculinity that I desire? What is it about masculinity that I despise? What is it about masculinity that I feel ashamed of possessing?

**January 20, 2001**

Edmonton

We did drag for the first time today in the workshop space! Well it was the first time for most of us. So much play and experimentation. It was great. We practiced moving our hips differently and taking up more space when sitting or standing. We played at being stoic and stiff with our bodies like a lot of white guys do. We played theatre games to help explore and play with gender and just to see what came out in our movements without thinking too much. We called one game "the gendered machine"; it was based off Augusto Boal's "build a machine" exercise. We got in a circle and went through different kinds of genders like man, gay man, woman, dyke, young boy, transman, etc. For each gender called out, anyone in the circle could go in the middle and do some sort of action, movement, and/or sound that they felt was some sort of expression or embodiment of that gender. You could stand still in a tableau

pose or do some kind of movement, combined with speech if you wanted. You could stay as long or as little as you wanted. Sometimes we built off each other's movements; other times each person's play seemed separate and disparate. Afterward, we debriefed to reflect on what happened and discussed challenges, gender stereotypes, etc. We found that we often relied on stereotypes for binary gender categories (and also actively tried to work against them at times), but many found it was more challenging to embody a trans kind of gender because we were wary of perpetuating stereotypes ... and I guess it felt like a really sensitive issue.

We also played with masculine expression in specific ways with different kinds of facial hair—goatees, full beards, soul patches, mutton chops ... we experimented with makeup to draw out more masculine eyebrows, brow ridges, cheek bones, and jaw lines. One of the facilitators, otherwise known that day as Allen the Makeup Guy, was really great in helping us learn some of this stuff. And we played with binding our tits for those of us who had them, and got to see how that felt and looked. We tried different techniques like binders, tensor bandages, and duct tape. As an experiment, I used packing tape to bind and put the sticky side out and stuck hair on it so it looked like I had shiny chest hair. It was hilarious. But also, really uncomfortable ... there was lots of laughing.

We also experimented with packing today. For me, it was the first time I'd done something like that and it was emotionally difficult for me. I used a pair of socks and when I put them in my crotch and felt eyes on me, people watching me, I felt a bit embarrassed. Shortly after that though we had a giggle about my large "package" was, and I felt a bit better. There is a playfulness and campiness around packing within the group and that seems to make it easier for me to try on these kind of embodiments ... though I'm still unpacking why my face flushed with shame in that moment.

**February 6, 2001**

Edmonton

I was playing shirts and skins basketball today at the university gym with a bunch of guys and some fuck ass told me to put on a shirt. It was kind of humiliating. And I felt fucking powerless.

We were asked to bring in a gender rant to the gender workshop next week. And since tit policing is something that I've really been steaming over for a while, I've decided to start there. The tits. The tits are a feminist *and* a trans issue.

I remember the first time I was told to put on a shirt. I was completely thrown. I was around seven or eight. I had no breasts. I was on the front porch in the country, at my Aunt's house, and I had been running around outside playing and riding bikes. Why did I have to wear a shirt and my boy cousins didn't? It felt so unfair and confusing. What I didn't realize at the time was that that moment was only the beginning. This moment stuck with me as the first time I became conscious that I was supposed to be a girl, or rather what it meant to be a girl.

I don't remember when I stopped wearing a bra—sometime around the mid-1990s. Except for sports. You'd think this kind of thing is of the past. I mean who even cares about whether or not someone wears a bra anymore? Well, people do. A lot of them. Now don't get me wrong, if you happen to have a large chest, a bra can most definitely be of some use. But the tits themselves are important here because they are a key marker of gender and sex to the world at large. They are one of the visible secondary sex characteristics that allows strangers to know who you "really are." You see my tits then you know I'm a woman. That's how this works. Luckily, I've always had relatively small tits. But they still seem to be so important to the world at large, especially if left to visibly flop around.

To be professional—I must put the tits in a holder. To *not* be a slut—I must put the tits in a holder. For God's sake, I don't want to embarrass my mother with those areolas peeking through my

thin tank top. And no side boob! To prevent breast-sagging or be anywhere in public, I must put the tits in the holder. If it's a scorching hot day, I must keep those puppies covered. If I'm playing basketball in a public gym, even a tit holder isn't enough.

So today when I was at the gym, a manager approached me and told me "You need to put your shirt on." We were playing shirts and skins because we didn't have any jerseys. Of course, I *was* wearing a sports bra. I wasn't just flapping in the wind; that hurts when running after all. Perhaps it seems like a small request to most people. But I was surprised and angered, a little embarrassed, and even a bit slut-shamed. "Why should I have to put on a shirt when the other guys don't?" I asked. All I got was, "It's our policy. You need to put your shirt on." I mean—Jesus—are my tits bound up in this sports bra really causing so much distress to the public? Are the children around? It's always about the children. I eventually complied and put on a shirt and promptly left the gym. But not before I encouraged him to think about how implementing that rule for only "female bodies" is clearly discriminatory. I threw in, "what if I don't identify as female?" to which he responded with an uncertain and very confused look.

I have often struggled with the tensions and confusions between "wanting to be a boy/male" and just "not wanting to be treated like a girl/female." Because being treated like a female isn't exactly a cakewalk. On the whole, being read and treated like a female means I get to experience the joys of misogyny, violence, harassment, condescension, and mansplaining. There's also a very high chance I'll get sexually assaulted at some point in my life (check). In fact, one in three women in Canada will experience sexual violence. I have the honour of receiving consistent, unwarranted, and unsolicited advice that questions my competence. My body is always available for commentary and inappropriate sexual innuendos; I've had to experience the weirdness of simultaneously being coddled and objectified. Even my male friends are not immune. It's endemic. But being read as female has another drawback for me because I don't actually feel totally female (or sometimes female at all), so being read as female is

usually jarring—it's like a tiny wince inside, a discombobulation, a momentary shock to the system. These tiny wincings, or micro-aggressions, build up day after day until, in my case, most of the time I just give up, settle for erasure and invisibility, and maybe wear my “they/them” pronoun pin to work every once in a while, for good measure. Most of the time, it feels too exhausting to educate the world around me.

### **February 12, 2000**

Edmonton

After the workshop last week, we went out in drag to Plato's Pizza/Garneau Pub for pizza and beer. It's kind of a dive bar close to campus. It was the first time I'd been in public in drag, and I felt a little bit vulnerable but also protected because I was with other people. We got some confused looks but no one really fucked with us. We took lots of pics and we had a lot of fun just hanging out. It was nice to connect with the other people in the workshop in this way. It felt like we were building friendship and family, community I guess. A kind of queer brotherhood.

### **February 27, 2001**

Edmonton

In classic Albertan fashion, we debuted our drag king cowboys twice over the last couple months, most recently last weekend. The adrenaline was unreal. And the cowboys have been a real hit with all the ladies and even the gay men at our shows. After the last show, we went out to a greasy diner and debriefed. We talked about how the show went in terms of choreography and all that, but also more personal and emotional stuff. Some things had been coming up for me and some other kings about taking on this kind of asshole misogynistic and toxic masculinity. For me, there was this odd kind of tension between desire and repulsion.

The first time I got into that Albertan cowboy character I was standing in front of the mirror with my one of my drag brothers. We were putting on our moustaches, recently gleaned from our bristly pubic hair. I think I was putting on a soul patch, and he was putting on some sideburns. While we were doing this, he was telling me a story about his mother. But as soon as I donned my moustache, just like that my body changed. I felt stronger, taller, more confident. But—I also became a macho asshole. I responded abruptly and dismissively, “I don’t give a fuck about your mother.”

In fact, the first few times I did Rusty—I got DEEP into my character, and he was somewhat of an asshole. So much so that some of my friends started commenting on my behaviour. Some of my straight female friends were at first oddly attracted to me as male, but they also felt it was very difficult to see me so hard. After this second show, my girlfriend said I was getting into drag in a negative way. She felt that masculinity didn’t necessarily need to be all about assholes. And we talked about whether or not it needed to be about the hardcore Albertan redneck guy. This character, he was the typical guy who would be in a “wife beater” tank, shooting beer cans off a fencepost, just kicking-back-the-brewskis kinda guy. That’s kind of what I saw with a lot of guys I worked with when I was in the trades, so it was an easy persona to take on. Before this last show, my partner said “you’ve gotta take it down, it’s too much. You’re being a total jerk.” Unfortunately, I don’t think I noticed it right away. We talked about it more and she told me she didn’t think she was gonna make it to the next show if we had to relate as you know, “woman get me a beer” kind of person. It wasn’t gonna happen.

So I’ve started realizing how my drag personae might affect others and I’ve started to tame him down a bit and reflect more on the drag characters I am creating and embodying. Although drag is an open invitation to play and experiment with masculinity, there are consequences. In a lot of ways, masculinity can be quite dangerous, particularly in terms of some of the cultural constructions around it. For me and many of my drag brothers, drag has had this important self-reflective piece- it’s challenged

me in a lot of ways in terms of having confidence and that kind of thing, which is really good. But it's also good to reflect on characters. For example, it's easy to make a caricature of something, but it's also important to unpack that, which is something I did with my Gym Bro character as well. I started to ask myself, what gender stereotypes am I basing this on? Just to be able to think about it critically. I wouldn't do any of it in my everyday life!

On the one hand, it's pretty liberating in a sense, taking up that space. It's like that concept of manspreading: a lot of cis men, especially, will take up so much space no matter where they are. Sitting on a bus, for example, they will spread their legs in a way that makes it hard for someone to sit next to them even if that's the only seat available. It's very invasive of other people's space. Taking up that space in performance feels good in a way but it's something that's done on stage and in a group where the context is very important and specific. But I highly doubt that I would ever put that character on just any day and go out into the world and do my grocery shopping. I think I'd be able to do that, but I'd get home and feel pretty gross because of how that would affect other people. But there is this liberating quality of confidence and ownership of space that I don't get to feel that often in my daily life. Somehow the performative space of drag kinging allows that to happen. I'm not sure why or how just yet. And I'm very aware that I feel this confidence and ownership of space through a lens that I wouldn't want to experience in my life, but just having the feeling there is something to think about.

And like any art that I've done, it comes out and then I try to look at it and see where that comes from. Like this Gym Bro character also started as really quite creepy. I think that stems from some male figures in my life who have not been the most positive; I think that came about without even realizing those issues were still there. Drag has helped me kind of expose them and realize they are there. If he's going to be creepy, is there a way he can be creepy or an asshole but consensual? How can I make the parody more explicit? What other kinds of masculinity can I try on? And as I move forward, I want these

things to become more important, just to be aware of what my characters are putting across because of how it might potentially affect other people.

**March 2, 2001**

Edmonton

I went home to visit my family over reading week. As usual, we all fell into the patterns of behaviour we've cultivated over many years together. Men do this. And women do this. I found it more exhausting than usual.

I grew up in a rural Southern Albertan, religious ranching family, and I remember as a kid I always wanted to be treated like a boy. Growing up, it was always really difficult for me to be the girl that I was supposed to be. I wanted to train horses but that was never possible for me. It was possible for my brothers to do stuff like that, and I would push really hard, going out with grandpa and trying to learn these things that were not really in the cards for me. Like training horses and just being able to talk and be taken seriously. When I did my cowboy character, it was really conflicting and weird. I didn't like my character very much, I was like, "wow, he's an asshole." He's a lot like my brothers, just kind of sleazy. But doing that character was important because it allowed me to explore that kind of heteronormative asshole cowboy masculinity that I grew up around and to potentially access the privileges such masculinity afforded. There was a little part of me that felt like I was making fun of the men in my family, but I was also like, fuck you! It was a way to make my displeasure known. There's something kind of therapeutic about it. And it was good to take this very serious cowboy role, knowing that they'd be totally upset with what we were doing with them.

We've talked about some of this stuff in our troupe, especially the intersections of masculinity and class. One drag brother, who is a ciswoman, voiced that she doesn't like parodying working-class

masculinity. She grew up poor and in a trailer, and feels that we are basically making fun of poor rural men. She kind of hates it, actually. She feels like sometimes there is too much hatred coming through and that there should be a feeling of loving the men we're pretending to be, and that good king performances aren't just sort of taking the piss out of masculinity but are really enjoying this performed masculinity. I think that's valid. There're a few men I love, sure. But I still feel pretty strongly that sometimes you have to mix in a little misandry to get the blood flowing properly, if you know what I'm saying.

There is some amount of making fun of masculinity, obviously. But I sometimes like to think about it as "failing" at masculinity and as being deconstructive; it's poking fun, but it isn't poking fun in that same way as say if you go to a drag show where it's female impersonators. There can be a lot of making fun of women in queening that just sort of goes a long with status quo misogyny. Not all of it obviously; I'm not anti-drag queen, but there is more of that, because when you make fun of women, there's a whole institution of that in our society, so sometimes it touches on that. Whereas making fun of men, or poking fun at masculinity, is poking fun at an oppressive group. So, it doesn't feel as mean. Or perhaps it feels justified somehow.

I think for me, drag kinging has given me access to male power in a way that I had never thought of or imagined. It's kind of maybe making fun sometimes, but it's still access to male power, and I really enjoy that. And I've become curious about drag queens too, because sometimes people see them as over-the-top, kind of making fun of women, and making women look bad. I don't necessarily agree that all queens do this. But a lot of them seem to. But for queens usually it's a step down on the status ladder when you move from male to female. They are losing power, I guess you could say in a way. And I think it's really different for drag kings to be accessing power that has been withheld. And sometimes it isn't really making fun of it, it's like this longing. At in those moments I feel like, "wow. I've got this and I

don't know what to do with it now, it feels uncomfortable." It's like this feeling of the right to be an asshole which is a weird dynamic because for me that's a far stretch. But it's also very strong; it's a sick strength. But I think we've seen it displayed in society so much, there's a huge bravado to it. And, I guess with that bravado comes a sense of power.

**June 22, 2001**

Edmonton

People say drag saves lives. It's true.

I've been doing drag for almost a year now. This week I got the opportunity to do a drag workshop with some youth at the Pride Centre, which was really heartwarming. To be able to share drag stories and advice with other young people struggling with similar kinds of issues.

Because before drag, I was in a really fucking dark place about my gender identity stuff, and where I fit without really understanding or knowing that there was a spectrum... that there was space in between or outside of the binary and that there was this community that existed that lets you safely explore what that meant to you. I feel like drag and having the opportunity to perform my characters and engage in these critical discussions around the political implications of drag is critical and essential to my survival as a queer person. Politically, for example, drag has helped me understand and explore the gender binary, but it has also been about discussing postmodern feminism, post-colonialism, performativity, and queer theory and working through things like cultural appropriation, race drag, and class drag. I feel like before I found my drag family, I was on the verge of being suicidal when it came to an understanding of my gender identity and my sexuality. I didn't have that community to come back to before drag, to see that I'm normal; that my body, my sexuality, and my gender expression are normal,

and that I'm not some freak who exists alone in this space but that these kinds of identities and expressions are actually loved and celebrated and sought after and desired.

Of course, we want to have the validation that comes along with performance. Not only because I'm being validated for being a good performer, but it's also about this expression of gender performance as something that gets validated, so that having the body that I have but then being able to bind my tits and put on this faux facial hair and then strut around in a completely different way. And who doesn't love that there's a bunch of ladies losing their shit at our performances? That particular expression and representation of myself that you don't see getting a lot of love for in the mainstream media. Or in lots of other places in my life.

I never really felt entirely comfortable with being perceived as female, but at times I haven't necessarily felt comfortable being perceived as male either. Within the gay community even, I don't always feel at home as butch, or femme, or trans. It's kind of confusing. Maybe I'm somewhere on the trans and butch spectrum. I've just always kind of felt a little bit stuck somewhere in the middle, or somewhere outside binaries. Through drag, I've started to unpack why I had those uncomfortable feelings, and I've discovered I actually do like being read as male. So doing drag is kind of therapeutic in a way, to be able to kind of explore that and explore it with people who want to help you explore it. People who don't want to tell you that it's weird and you should stop. Like, when you don't feel like one or the other, or you feel like both, or you feel like neither, it can be really confusing when other people around you will say things that try to force you to stay in one box or the other. Like even my partner the other day said to me, "I want you to be my girlfriend," which really kind of hurt me.

Nobody likes to admit that we need this external validation in order to feel good about ourselves, but it's fucking true because we are human beings and we need that kind of stuff. We need to know that there are other people out there that share our identities in some way or another, and that's

why drag is important to me, because it validates and normalizes and celebrates everything that has to do with my gender and my sexuality, and that sort of expression. I know for a fact that for some people in our community it's been a survival tool. They wouldn't be here with us today if it weren't for drag; if it wasn't for that opportunity to put on something that was more powerful than they were, they thought they would've ended their lives by suicide. Drag gave them the courage to be sassy or snotty or trashy or whatever it is that they needed to be able to step out into the world. And for a time, they weren't themselves for a little while. So it's a kind of anonymity where we can step out and be someone else. Because still today even, but back in the day, lots of people carried a great burden and shame about being gay or lesbian, let alone being non-binary or trans. And drag is a way that we can step out of that for a moment, even if it's temporary.

### **July 6, 2001**

Being and performing.

For some of my drag brothers, putting on drag has been purely performative. It's a way to explore theoretical ideas of how identity is a social construction and how identity itself, including gender identity, is a performance. Some of my drag brothers are really big into postmodern feminism right now. And some of us are learning about this kind of stuff in our women and gender studies classes. We are realizing that a lot of identity is cast onto us, more than what we embody as this sort of natural essential being. On the one hand, performing masculinity is a way of deconstructing it. However, the tension between being and performing gender can be quite complicated. In a way, the idea of gender being performative goes against the idea of gender being an inherent part of identity. Recognizing gender expression is performative and that it changes from context to context is fine. It's all lovely and theoretical, but who you believe or feel yourself to be doesn't necessarily feel like a performance,

particularly a performance that often relies on parody and exaggeration. One of my brothers, for example, was talking the other day about how he doesn't find masculinity particularly laughable and that making a large spectacle of masculinity is hard for him. Right now, he identifies as butch, but he is starting to transition into a male identity and expression in everyday life. He enjoys being read as male and trying on what passing feels like, but he's not so much into the exaggerative and comedic aspects of kinking.

I understand this sentiment, although I do enjoy the exaggerative spectacles. But also for me, I feel like something is building and growing inside me. In a way, through drag I feel like I'm constructing an identity and an expression of that identity. Some of my drag characters are shaping the person I want to be in real life, not just in performance. I'm also starting to transfer the skills that I learn through drag into everyday life such as public speaking, being a leader, socializing, and making those connections with people. And also, being visibly seen as this external masculine presence; it's like, okay, this might be a bit of permission to maybe move my own gender expression to more masculine, or to try this out maybe a bit more in my own life. I think without doing drag this might have happened anyway. I don't know. But it definitely is a confirming feature or permission to kind of explore that. I'm starting to feel more authentic, whatever that means. Perhaps my drag character is sometimes the person I want to be in real life, or maybe a hyperbolized version of the person I want to be. I've been doing this new punk rocker guy, and so I get to be this sexy guy who is also politically savvy, which is part of the allure. I've been feeling like that is more the kind of person that I want to be—an ally, and those kinds of things. In a lot of ways, doing drag seems to be about developing my politics, as a gender fucker. And this is starting to feel like a huge part of my identity.

Somebody once told me drag is very similar to putting on your armour. In a strange way, even though we think of armour as a façade to protect the self, drag can be a way to discover parts of our

self. When we're growing up, if we're vulnerable or an introverted person, putting on that dress and that wig, or putting on that moustache, allows us to be able to talk to people and to have the confidence that we may not necessarily feel that we have in our daily life. It's uncanny to think about getting into someone else's skin as a way to find comfort in our own.

However, it's not always easy to transition from performance life to everyday life and back again. Drag can be a big ego boost—something that seems to aid many queers in building confidence. But sometimes that mentality doesn't always easily translate back into daily life, particularly perhaps if you're trans. Drag has definitely been a safe space for me to explore identity, but there has also been an element of it that feels unsafe in the sense that we all know this is just pretend. It's a little bit like being a little kid and pretending you're a superhero. And then wanting to continue being a superhero and wanting people to treat you like that all the time, and... well, we gotta grow up eventually. I have to take off the superhero costume, and realize I'm not actually a superhero, I'm just a little boy. So, I suppose there's every chance drag can be just as debilitating in that way.

### **August 20, 2001**

Edmonton

We put on our first big community show this summer. We had some new performers and some seasoned ones as well. Putting on this event got me thinking more about the support and validation that the lgbttq+ community provides for drag performers (and audiences). I think part of drag is definitely about creating a community, especially when you're involved in it. We had weeks of workshopping, rehearsing, and learning together that created special team-like bonds in what we have tried to make a safe and anti-oppressive space for gender performance. For me, it has been fun doing it in the community and in this group context so that I'm not doing it on my own, which I think would have been

a lot scarier. And I think because we perform primarily for queer audiences, there is a certain dynamic between performers and audiences that wouldn't exist with other kinds of audiences. Queer community audiences make drag what it is. Without that piece, I don't think any of us would experience the same level of support and celebration of our acts. And in our troupe, when we get into drag, we are brothers all night. Like if anyone is feeling unsafe, we regroup in the dressing room or bathroom; we go in there and help each other out if we're feeling like something is taking us out of character or if we are just feeling unsafe for any reason. And we kind of pump each other back up. And we have each other. It feels like a real sense of community.

Performing drag has felt kind of like an acknowledgement to myself or a valuing of aspects of myself. Whether that's the kind of big expression of masculinity or just being a big old gender freak. My drag troupe and audiences both provide a community of support for that. I don't have that same kind of support in other aspects of my life or in our culture in general. With some of my family, for example, I can't talk about transgressing gender boundaries too much. Or I don't feel comfortable talking about it too much. Sometimes it feels like I'm invisible. So with drag it's an opportunity to really let that part of me out. That's why it feels a little bit like a coming-out. But I feel like the language around this stuff is limited. It's hard when you're someone in between culturally identified gender categories, to make sense of that. When I signed up for the Gender, Movement, and Performance workshop, I wanted the opportunity to try on masculinity in a further sense in a way that would be safe, culturally valued, and playful. And so far, that's what has happened. I don't know if it's internalized homophobia, or repression of some versions of masculinity, but to just kind of say, here's a space for that part of me to just go out and play with it and have fun with it.

It feels kind of like an encouragement, acceptance, or a reaffirmation of that acceptance. I've noticed this especially if performers seem kind of shy or awkward, then audiences will cheer for them

even more. When we perform, I hear a lot of positive woot woots and woohos and stuff like that, cheering us on. At this past show, me and another drag king ripped our shirts open and we had bras on to play with gender blurring, and we pulled socks out of our bras and put them in our pants. And I really didn't know if there was gonna be silence or a couple of our friends like, "ooo yeah take it off," but when we ripped our shirts off it was just like this roar. And it was like, holy fuck! That's unreal. That they are screaming for me, for us, because we're taking off our clothes. It was like the reverse of anything we ever thought would happen. And I think, you know we talk about everything that we try to get across to people. But, man! I think we get changed on stage.

I don't tend to hear that kind of applause elsewhere. I mean it may happen out in the world, but I tend to pick up more on the stares, or weird looks, or kids asking weird questions, that kind of stuff. I took my nieces to the girls' bathroom the other day and people kept looking at me like, "what are you doing here?" And that's happened more than a few times. Drag has given me more confidence with that kind of stuff and helped me be comfortable enough to go into society. Like sometimes having to go into the girls' bathroom even though I don't look like a girl at all. In drag, it's more obvious people value my queer or gender expression because people are screaming and hootin' and hollering for me. And whether it's sexualized or not, it feels like, "hey, what you're doing is awesome!"

And even off the stage, like at rehearsals or mingling after shows, have been really fun and affirming places for me. What has been really cool for me is the circulating afterward. When I'm still in drag and drinking in the bar, that kind of stuff. That feels good. Even though everyone of course knows it's drag, it still feels like I am being read and interacted with in the way that I want to be. And of course, people seem to have some degree of respect in the gay community for someone in drag. They'll change their pronouns and even if it's just for the night, they seem to buy in.

**February 20, 2002**

Edmonton

I was facilitating a workshop yesterday and another young person in their early 20s asked me why drag is important to me. And they asked me how I thought drag helped people in the lgbttq+ community. What first came to mind was family. Being gay was not an acceptable thing to be in my family. And since I'm super, super, queer, that didn't go too well. Some of my drag brothers have decent parents, it isn't like all of us are estranged from our families for being queer and/or trans. But some of us are. And even those parents who are somewhat accepting—a lot of us still feel invisible and unsupported in a lot of ways. Drag has given me opportunities for chosen family, I explained.

I've been thinking a lot about this conversation since the workshop and I keep coming back to my feelings around my first experience of coming out to my mom. I want to get it down on paper, to get it out of me. Maybe it will help make things clearer for me, whether I share it with others or not.

When I first came out to my mom about being gay, we were walking to a bowling alley just down the street from where I was living at the time. I used to live on Riddle Road, there with some friends and my dog and cat. We had a hammock in the backyard that hung between two crabapple trees, and a covered carport porch. Close by was a local food co-op that had a real tasty hot bar that I loved.

So, we were walking to go bowling. I didn't plan the whole "coming out" event, but I was feeling the need to do so since I had been in a relationship for a while. And I just happened to have sent my mother a copy of a paper I had written that had gotten published in the university undergraduate scholarly journal. It was called "Anthropological research on homosexuality in Latin America and the lesbian drought." Sure, I was proud. But I'm not gonna lie—it was a subtle hint, a nudge to start the conversation because the silence around gay shit in my family was suffocating me. I acted in a similar

way with my blood dad, when he was alive, by choosing *Boys Don't Cry* as a movie for us to watch. You know, just a casual light drama (sarcasm)—a way for me to suss out their reactions without directly involving myself. That choice didn't go over so well with my evil stepmother because to no surprise—I did involve myself. It ended with my blood dad asking me to leave, after I had driven two hours to visit him.

So my mother must have actually read that article where I wrote about lesbians, and as we were walking along, she started to ask me questions. I remember feeling knots forming in my stomach. A panic rising in my throat. But nothing prepared me for what her reaction would actually be. I was sure that she knew already anyways. My mom and stepdad had already confronted me at 16 about being gay, which I denied even though I had already slept with one of my female friends/teammates and was hopelessly in teenage-love with my other best friend, Carmen. But between the walk from my house to the bowling alley parking lot, my mom had confirmed that I was in fact a homosexual. A sinful ball of disgustingness. Somewhere along the way she had asked me something like, “why are you writing about this, are you gay?” To which I responded something like, “what if I was, would that be okay?”

I don't remember much after that besides her screaming in the bowling alley parking lot yelling things like, “which one are you? The masculine one or the feminine one?” I tried to explain that it doesn't always work like that. And I'm still unsure to this day why that even mattered to her. I think in her apparent shock she just spat out whatever she held to be true about gayness, which was arguably very limited. If I'm being truly honest, my mother had a real-life nervous breakdown right then and there. It was as if her whole world came crashing down. It was raw and unhinged. There was nothing subtle about it.

By the time I got her back to my house she was screaming hysterically in my front yard, “Do you eat each other!? Do you eat each other?! Is that what you do?!” Those words still make me feel icky

inside. They disturbed me then and they disturb me now. I've never really liked the phrase "eating out" anyways. I prefer, "suck my short, fat clit." You know, gotta keep it classy.

It became a blur after a while. In my bedroom, her sitting on my bed, crying and saying over and over again: "I just don't understand. I just don't understand." And me, holding her hand, consoling her. It went on like that for several hours. Yes, I said several *hours*. I took on that emotional labour, as I usually do. Even when I was the one who really needed comforting. I think something was said about grandkids and I said I was sorry. In fact, I think I said I was sorry a lot.

It's strange because I often think about how pathetic grown adults are that obsess over how much their parents fucked them up. You know, "daddy or mommy didn't love me." But the thing is, most people never truly get over parental rejection. They just keep seeking and seeking. The thing is, I love my mother more than anyone else in this world. And as much as I like to believe she has changed—this story always haunts me—it tells me a deep-seated truth about what is really inside her heart. I want to share this story because it's not only an important part of my gender journey, it's also part of understanding why queers like myself need chosen family, why they need people to protect them, support them, and be on their side. This story is important to understanding part of why queers and gender-non-conforming people need spaces to express and explore parts of themselves that were never valued or celebrated. For me, drag is one of those spaces.

Drag is also a way to reach out to others who may feel the same; whether I'm doing that for me or another queer kid in the audience or at workshop to kind of have some acknowledgement or visibility. It's important because it's a way to reach out to other people, so that they know they're not the only one who feels like this, and that if they want to do something like this, they can. So it's nice to let other people know that they can have support, too. Just sometimes we do have to look for it. Because I think that's pretty common; I mean, that's the journey for the transperson I think, coming to a

point where you begin to move into that place of authenticity, whatever that looks like. But I don't think that's unique to transpeople. I think that's something that has existed inside of the non-heterosexual community; maybe it has existed in all of society, but when we narrow it down inside of *our community*, I think we see that a lot in our community that people aren't able to be themselves, and they put on a persona at some level when they're out in public, and even with family. And for those who really struggle and whom performance allows them that freedom, it's a great place to be.

**July 25, 2015**

Vancouver

I just got back from a visit to Edmonton yesterday. Sooo good to see old friends. Went out with my old drag buds while I was in Edmonton. They dragged me out to see a drag show, which to our delight had some local kings. Even though I rarely find comfort in late-night bar adventures anymore, the warmth of the beer in my belly and the nostalgia of the night was a sweet and comforting kind of feeling. Sitting around the table, we reminisced about the old days before and after the show. Funny how memory works. We all have little pieces of the times we spent together. What we each remember and hold on to. As we sat around the table together, it felt kind of like collective memory patchworking. Sparking one another's memories. Filling in the gaps for each other. Finding mutual delight in shared experiences.

When I got home, I went looking for a box of sentimental goodies I had tucked away in my closet. I knew I had some old drag stuff in there. Along with some old birthday cards and random colorful rocks and photos, I found this journal and some ole pics. They're almost 15 years old! I really wanted to revisit what I wrote and was feeling during that time because it's been a long time since I read this drag journal. Reading through it again has sparked a lot of memories for me. I didn't realize it back then, but as I think back on those days now, even though I didn't keep performing, I realize how

formative drag was for me both in terms of my gender journey and my emerging queer politics. It came at a pivotal point in my life. And it was a space of playfulness and transgression; a space where my queer sexuality and my masculinity were actually valued. Drag allowed my identity to be big and confident. It was that space where I got to lay it on real thick. And even space for some irreverence toward what I felt like at that time was a world full of haters.

It really felt like a space where anything could happen; a space full of fun, creativity, and experimentation, especially back when it was new and when people were just getting into it. And in some of our drag numbers, I really felt like it was me and my friends dancing around in our living room in our underwear. Literally, in some cases, we were in our underwear and yet there's a room full of people drinking beer and cheering us on. Playful experiences like that went a long way in solidifying a community of experimentation. Years later, watching those kings up there the other day—it seemed like there was still that newness and experimental feel for those who were performing.

But looking back I'm reminded also of how much misogyny I had internalized without even really knowing it. And how much emotional negotiating and self-reflection I went through during that time. I wonder what kings are mulling over now. The same stuff? Putting on that moustache and strutting my stuff came coupled with a weird sense of entitlement. It was kinda disturbing how easily I could perform a douchebag asshole kind of guy. But he just came out of me. But I still feel like performing drag was also therapeutic in that way. Get the demons out, kind of thing. And it helped me reflect on the kinds of men who have been in my life. And what kind of person I wanted to be—what kind of masculinity I wanted to embody and ones that I definitely did not want to put out there into the world.

Over the years I've realized how much violence and shame I had to unlearn, that I had internalized and turned against myself. I realize that in some ways drag connected me to some kind of blossoming, and—I hesitate to use the words—latent phallic desires. For me, there was a lot of shame

attached to those desires. I spent a lot of years on the “anti-cock” team and I think that was part of why I felt shameful and vulnerable about revealing what might be interpreted as my erotic phallic desires. But what I have also come to realize is that if you’ve experienced the impacts of phallic power, you will naturally feel shame for that phallic desire. The hidden anxiety and shame about assuming that power is that you feel insecure about it. And unsurprisingly, shame perpetuates the system of patriarchal power. I realized I liked performing because it allowed me to have a space to express a masculine part of myself, and for me I think part of that masculine self was possessing a phallus both symbolically and literally. I’ve always felt pretty masculine in terms of comparing myself to other female people. Not stone butch or anything. But validation of those desires goes a long way in feeling at home inside yourself. And you know drag kinging isn’t all about dicks and therapy, but I realize now that part of it for me was about the implications of packing and exploring what masculinity meant to me—and part of that was dealing with shame.

Drag was also about letting off steam. A kind of stress relief. It’s like drag gives folks in the queer community permission to really express their desire for that non-normative expression or non-normative performance, because there’s that celebration. It allowed me to play with masculinity in this very specific context, and it didn't have to mean anything, because everybody else was doing it around me. I was just playing a role. And that playfulness and safety were really important parts of opening up possibilities for me. And even though dressing as a man didn’t have to mean anything at first, it did come to mean a great deal to me. It gave me an outlet for masculine expression without transitioning and gave me opportunities to experiment with passing as male and to see what that felt like. It was the first opportunity I had to do that kind of stuff. And it was okay to fail at passing, too. Sometimes that was the point. Drag kinging I think helped me find balance because I was able to experiment with gender

expression beyond just masculinity, too. Playing with femininity, queerness, and blurring gender boundaries were all part of that journey.

And that was a really important thing that drag did for me: it opened up that lens to looking at my life differently, looking at how the world works differently, and how that sort of came to be. In many ways, drag kinging gave me the confidence to step out of the gender binary. To have my masculinity and sexiness celebrated and admired rather than erased or ridiculed. The enactments, costuming, movements, performances, workshops sessions, conversations—through all these processes I worked through my intellectual questions and emotional baggage. It wasn't that I figured out all this stuff before I performed drag; the practice of doing drag itself was part of the journey.



Photo: Lazy Kitten Productions & Pony Meyer

## Appendix B: Information Letter and Consent Form (For Performers)

**Study Title:** Queer performance spaces & practices: an exploration of drag kinging & transgenderqueer experiences

### Research

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### Supervisor:

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780-492-1025

### Background

You are being asked to be in this study because of your experiences both performing as a drag king and watching drag king performance, which I would like to learn about. The results of this study will be used in support of my PhD dissertation.

### Purpose

This study is about understanding the experiences of transgender and genderqueer-identified drag kings and the role that drag kinging plays (or has played) in their lives.

It also looks to make sense of how and why particular kinds of performance spaces and practices allow for the creation and celebration of transgender and genderqueer identities and desires.

This research involves interviewing drag kings in Edmonton and Calgary (and potentially other areas), observing performances, workshops, and meetings, as well as engaging audience members. It will also include my own drag king performances, collaborations, and personal reflections.

Please feel free to ask any questions you may have at any time.

\*You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

### Study Procedures

1) You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, ranging from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview after the initial interview. If you agree, interviews will be audio recorded and can be done in person or over the phone. If in person, the interviews will take place in a location that is comfortable and convenient for you. During these interviews, you will be asked about your personal experiences as they relate to drag and gender identity, your performances as a drag king, and/or your thoughts and feelings about drag kinging performers, spaces, and/or practices. If you agree, your interview transcripts will be used for analysis and dissemination (examples of dissemination: public presentations, performances, or publications).

2) In addition to the interview, you also have the option (not mandatory) to participate in the following 2 activities:

A. You can share your ‘interview responses’ to my questions through performance (example: drag, dance), writing (example: poetry or prose), or audio recording of poetry readings or music, either publically or privately. You can do this instead of an interview or in addition to an interview if you would like to do both.

B. You may have the opportunity to participate in a group collaborative creation. This might include a collaborative performance or making a zine with other interviewees and/or me (a zine is usually described as a self-published work of images and writing).

3) Your live public performances might be observed, audio recorded, video recorded, and/or photographed. These may be used for analysis and dissemination (examples of dissemination: public presentations, performances, or publications).

4) If you consent, I might use past video recordings or photographs of your drag performances (examples: public performance videos on YouTube) for analysis and for dissemination (examples of dissemination: public presentations, performances, or publications).

5) **IMPORTANT:**

Before being published or used in public, you will be offered a chance to review the transcript from *your* interview, the visual and audio materials from *your* performances, and any written material you have submitted to me. This will be done via email, mail, or phone depending on which is most convenient and comfortable for you. You will have the option of not having any interview responses, video, audio recordings or photographs included in the analysis and/or public presentation or publication. If you wish any material (interview responses, written, video, audio or photographs) not to be included in the research, and if you inform the researcher of your wishes the material will not be included.

\*The timeline of this study is 4-5 years, beginning in December 2012 (retrospectively) and ending approximately in December 2017.

\*Out of respect for your artwork and recognition, you can have the option to have your identity represented on materials (or you can remain anonymous). Please inform the researcher as to your wishes in this respect.

\*A copy of your transcripts, video, audio recordings, and/or photographs can be made available to you (by email or mail).

**Benefits**

There are no specific or guaranteed benefits to participating in this research. However, through the interview process you may or may not gain a deeper understanding of your experiences within your respective drag troupes. By participating in collaborative creations, you may have opportunities for creative community-building. By participating in this research you may help build upon previous scholarly work on drag king culture and transgender studies. You may also contribute to understanding how queer communities are mobilizing/organizing to create safe(r) performance spaces.

### **Risks**

There are potential discomforts or risks associated with your participation and the sharing of information. For example, during interviews you may be asked to discuss topics such as gender identity, discrimination, transphobia, or racism. These topics may be sensitive issues for some people and may have the potential to cause some emotional stress and anxiety, especially for people who may have experienced traumatic events as a result of these topics. At any point during the process, you may choose not to answer any questions.

I believe these risks to be minimal and I do not expect these risks to be greater than those encountered by you in other aspects of your everyday life. However, it is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study, but I will take all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to a study participant.

### **Voluntary Participation**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. And you are *not* obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.

Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time up until the final withdrawal date. I would honor your wishes to end, withdraw, or modify your participation, including the exclusion of your contributions retroactively. You can communicate these wishes to me at any time via email, mail, or phone.

The final date for withdrawing any of your information from the study is **September 15, 2016** (this date is set for after the analysis is completed and the writing of the dissertation begins).

### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

- This research may be used for the following: PhD dissertation, research articles, presentations, zines, teaching, public performances, and/or workshops. For written work, you will have the choice of whether or not you would like to be personally identified or if you would like to remain anonymous. You can choose to use pseudonyms in written work. For photographs and videos, you will have the choice on whether or not you would like your public performances to be video-recorded and/or photographed; and you will have the choice on how you would like these recordings to be used. Even if you have consented to this use, you will have the opportunity to review those specific photos and videos before they are used in the public domain (such as publications, presentations) should you change your mind.
- All interview transcripts will be kept confidential. I may hire a transcriber to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews into written transcripts. Doing so would help me reduce the amount of time I have to spend at the computer (part of managing my chronic pain). I will make every effort to ensure the transcriber is not closely related to the project or participants and that they understand the confidentiality agreements for those involved. The transcriber will not have access to your name from the audio recordings (I will manually edit out your name of the recording before giving it to the transcriber).
- Only my Supervisory committee, the interview transcriber, and myself will have access to the interview data. If you consent, your transcripts (or pieces of your transcript) may be used in collaborative creations with other interviewees and/or myself. This would involve using your interview transcript as a text for the purposes of creating art (example: your interview text might be used in the process of creating a collaborative performance piece). Your name will not be attached to the transcripts (unless you request for your name to be included).

- In group settings, I cannot ensure complete confidentiality as I can't control other members of the group (examples: collaborative creation processes, drag troupe organizational meetings, or public performances).
- Data (interview transcripts, photos, videos, analysis) will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following completion of the research project. This is a requirement from the university in case of an audit. Electronic data will be password protected. You can choose for your data to be destroyed (in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality).
- You can choose to receive a copy of your interview transcript and/or a report of the research findings. You can indicate your interest in receiving such materials during the interview or at any time after that. These items can be sent to you through email or mail.
- I may use the data I get from this study in future research (in addition to this research), but if I do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

### **Further Information**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact the Principal Investigator, Pony Meyer at 780-721-5387 (email: [ammeyer1@ualberta.ca](mailto:ammeyer1@ualberta.ca)) or their Supervisor, Dr. Lisa McDermott at 780-492-1025 (email: [lisam@ualberta.ca](mailto:lisam@ualberta.ca)).

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

### **Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study in the following way(s) (please check all that apply):

\_\_\_\_\_to be interviewed and to have my interview transcripts be used for analysis.

\_\_\_\_\_to have my interview responses be used for dissemination (examples: public presentations, performances, or publications). Please **choose by circling** one or the other if you would like your responses to be **anonymous** or **non-anonymous**.

\_\_\_\_\_to have my public performances be video recorded, audio recorded, and/or photographed and used for analysis.

\_\_\_\_\_to have my public performances used for dissemination (these public performances may have been video-recorded, audio-recorded, or photographed by the myself or others).

\_\_\_\_\_to have my written materials included for analysis.

\_\_\_\_\_to have my written materials included for dissemination (examples: public performances, presentations, or publications).



## **Appendix C: Information Letter and Consent Form (For Audience Members or other interviewees)**

**Study Title:** Queer performance spaces & practices: an exploration of drag kinging & transgenderqueer experiences

### **Research**

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### **Supervisor:**

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780-492-1025

### **Background**

You are being asked to be in this study because of your experiences watching drag king performance, which I would like to learn about. The results of this study will be used in support of my PhD dissertation.

### **Purpose**

This study is about understanding the experiences of transgender and genderqueer-identified drag kings and the role that drag kinging plays (or has played) in their lives.

It also looks to make sense of how and why particular kinds of performance spaces and practices allow for the creation and celebration of transgender and genderqueer identities and desires.

This research involves interviewing drag kings in Edmonton and Calgary (and potentially other areas), observing performances, workshops, and meetings, as well as engaging audience members. It will also include my own drag king performances, collaborations, and personal reflections.

Please feel free to ask any questions you may have at any time.

\*You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

### **Study Procedures**

1) You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, ranging from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview after the initial interview. If you agree, interviews will be audio recorded and can be done in person or over the phone. If in person, the interviews will take place in a location that is comfortable and convenient for you. During these interviews, you will be asked about your personal experiences as they relate to drag and gender identity, your experiences watching drag king performances, and/or your thoughts and feelings about drag kinging performers, spaces, and/or practices. If you agree, your interview transcripts will be used for analysis and dissemination (examples of dissemination: public presentations, performances, or publications).

2) Instead of doing a face-to-face or a phone interview, you have the option to respond to my questions through email. You are welcome to respond to these questions with any form of writing that you like.

### 3) **IMPORTANT:**

Before being published or used in public, you will be offered a chance to review the transcript from *your* interview and any written material you have submitted to the me. This will be done via email, mail, or phone depending on which is most convenient and comfortable for you. You will have the option of not having any interview responses or written materials included in the analysis and/or public presentation or publication. If you wish any material not to be included in the research, and if you inform the researcher of your wishes the material will not be included.

\*The scope of this study is 3-4 years, beginning in December 2012 and ending approximately in April 2017.

\*Out of respect for your artwork and recognition, you can have the option to have your identity represented on materials (or you can remain anonymous).

\*A copy of your transcripts can be made available to you (email or mail).

#### **Benefits**

There are no specific or guaranteed benefits to participating in this research. However, the interviews could allow you to voice something one-on-one that you haven't been able to voice or don't feel comfortable voicing in a larger group. Through the interview process you may or may not gain a deeper understanding of your experiences participating in drag king performance spaces. By participating in this research you may help build upon previous scholarly work on drag king culture and transgender studies. You may also contribute to understanding how queer communities are mobilizing/organizing to create safe(r) performance spaces.

#### **Risks**

There are several potential discomforts or risks associated with your participation and the sharing of information. For example, during interviews you may be asked to discuss topics such as gender identity, discrimination, transphobia, or racism. These topics may be sensitive issues for some people and may have the potential to cause some emotional stress and anxiety, especially for people who may have experienced traumatic events as a result of these topics. At any point during the process you may choose not to answer any questions.

I believe these risks to be minimal and I do not expect these risks to be greater than those encountered by you in those aspects of your everyday life. However, it is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study, but I will take all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to a study participant.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. And you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.

Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time up until the final withdrawal date. I will honor your wishes to end, withdraw, or modify your participation, including the exclusion of your contributions retroactively. You can communicate these wishes to the me at any time via email, mail, or phone.

The final date for withdrawing any of your information from the study is June 15, 2016 (this date is set for after the analysis is completed and the writing of the dissertation begins).

### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

- This research may be used for the following: PhD dissertation, research articles, presentations, zines, teaching, public performances, and/or workshops. For written work, you will have the choice of whether or not you would like to be personally identified or if you would like to remain anonymous. You can choose to use pseudonyms in written work. Even if you have consented to the use of your written material and/or interview transcripts, you will have the opportunity to review those materials before they are used in the public domain (such as publications, presentations, performances) should you change your mind.
- Indiscriminate photographs or videos will not be taken of you. If you are caught in the frame of a photograph or video your face will be blurred and voice dubbed over (unless you explicitly request otherwise).
- All interview transcripts will be kept confidential. I may hire a transcriber to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews into written transcripts. Doing so would help me reduce the amount of time I have to spend at the computer (part of managing my chronic pain). I will make every effort to ensure the transcriber is not closely related to the project or participants and that they understand the confidentiality agreements for those involved. The transcriber will not have access to your name from the audio recordings (I will manually edit out your name of the recording before giving it to the transcriber).
- Only my Supervisory committee, the transcriber, and myself will have access to this data. If you consent, your transcripts (or pieces of your transcript) may be used in collaborative creations with other interviewees and/or myself. This would involve using your interview transcript as a *text* for the purposes of creating art (example: your interview text might be used in the process of creating a collaborative performance piece). Your name will not be attached to the transcripts (unless you request for your name to be included).
- In group settings that are not specifically or solely part of this research, I cannot ensure complete confidentiality as I can't control other members of the group (examples: public performances).
- Data (interview transcripts, analysis) will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following completion of the research project. This is a requirement from the university in case of an audit. Electronic data will be password protected. You can choose for your data to be destroyed (in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality).
- You can choose to receive a copy of your interview transcript and/or a report of the research findings. You can indicate your interest in receiving such materials during the interview or at any time after that. These items can be sent to you through email or mail.
- I may use the data I get from this study in future research (in addition to this research), but if I do this it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board.

### **Further Information**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact the Principal Investigator, Pony Meyer at 780-721-5387 (email: [ammeyer1@ualberta.ca](mailto:ammeyer1@ualberta.ca)) or their Supervisor, Dr. Lisa McDermott at 780-492-1025 (email: [lisam@ualberta.ca](mailto:lisam@ualberta.ca)).



## Appendix D: Interview Guide (for performers)

### Personal/Intro

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

-what kind of work do you do

-what do you enjoy doing?

-Have you lived in Edmonton long? What brought you here?

### Coming to drag

Can you tell me a little bit about how you got into doing drag?

Why were you interested in drag?

When did you start doing drag?

How long have you been doing drag?

Do you still do drag now? Why/why not?

In your own words, how would you describe drag? How would you explain to the uninitiated what drag kinging is?

How did you learn how to do drag?

Have you ever had a mentor or drag daddy to help you learn about drag? If yes, what kinds of things did they teach you?

Have you ever taken any performance workshops or classes? If yes, can you say what those were like? What kinds of things did you learn? Were they specific to drag kinging performance? Were they helpful? Why?

What kind of drag performances do you do?

Can you describe one of your favorite drag pieces that you've done?

Why is that your favorite?

Can you tell me a little bit about your drag character(s)?

(Personality, aesthetics, costume)

What's one of your favorite props to use in drag king performance? Can you describe it?

How have your life experiences informed your drag king performance? (e.g. academia, privilege, race, class, gender, performance experiences, etc)

Have you ever done a drag queen performance? If so, can you tell me a bit about it? Or any interest in doing one? Why or why not?

Do you do any other kinds of performance besides drag? If yes, what kinds do you do? Do you any other kinds of art? If so, what kinds?

\*\*What do you see as the differences between kinging and queening? For you personally?

## **Role of drag in your life**

Do you feel like drag is/was important to you? If so, can you tell me a little bit about why?

What role has drag played in your life? Do you think drag has played a significant role in your life? In what way? (i.e. what do you get out of performing drag, as a performer?)

Have you formed any significant relationships through performing drag? What kinds of relationships? Why or how are/were they important to you?

Have you performed with other drag kings? What were your experiences like performing with them?

Do you consider yourself an artist? Do you feel like drag is part of your art? If yes, in what ways? Do you feel like drag plays a role in your life as an artist?

From your perspective, is there any relationship between your performances and your politics? If yes, can you describe how? Is there a particular performance you could describe that relates to your politics? (If relevant – ask how they define ‘politics’)

Do you think drag king performance offers a space for political expression? If yes/no, for who? why do you think this? Can you think of any examples?

In everyday life, how do you experience your gender?

Are you concerned with passing in everyday life?

If yes, what do you do to pass?

Do you face any barriers when trying to pass? If yes, what kinds?

From your vantage point, do you think there is the relationship between gender identity and drag king performance? If yes, what is this relationship like for you? If no, why do you believe that?

Do you feel that drag allows you to express things you aren’t able to in your everyday life? If yes, can you explain?

How does your body feel when you do drag? Or what does it feel like to embody a masculine physicality when performing as a drag king? How does this experience compare to your everyday experiences (over the course of your life)?

Do you experience any kinds of particular emotions when you perform drag? If yes, what are they? Would you like to explain a bit more about any of these?

\*\*What’s your relationship with drag (kinging) like now?

## **Drag, space, and queer community**

What do you think audiences get out of drag performances? What do you think they can get out of drag king performances in specifically?

What role do you think audiences play for drag performers? Specifically, for drag kings

How does the audience impact you when you perform (as a king/queen, differences? What do they do for you? Do you ever interact with audiences? If so, in what kinds of ways?

Do you think drag plays or has played a role in the queer community? If yes, what kind of role does it play? From your perspective, do you think this has changed over time? If yes, how so and why? Has any of this been particularly relevant to your life?

In general, do you feel safe when you perform as a drag king? Why or why not?

In what kinds of places have you performed? Have you ever performed in non-queer spaces or been out in public in drag? If yes, what was that experience like? If no, are there any specific reasons why you've chose not to perform in those kinds of spaces?

Do you feel like drag king shows are safe spaces for transgender or genderqueer performers/audiences? If yes/no, why do you feel this way? (king and queen)?

What kinds of practices do you think can make performance spaces safe(r)?

Have you seen any of these practices in action?

If yes, where?

(ALT:) Have you ever noticed specific things that drag show organizers or performers do to make the space safer or more inclusive? If yes, can you explain?)

Do you feel like drag performances can be offensive to transpeople? Why or why not? Do you feel like this is the case for both drag queen and drag king culture?

What do you make of accusations of misogyny, racism, and transphobia aimed at drag performers? (king and queen)

### **Alberta/Canadian Kinging**

Would you say you've seen a lot of drag shows? Drag king shows?

Have you seen drag king shows in Edmonton? What were those like? Anything stand out for you?

Have you seen drag king shows outside of Edmonton? Outside of Alberta?  
What were those like? Anything stand out for you?

Have you noticed any differences in kinging between kinging in Alberta and outside Alberta? If yes, can you explain?

If you were to characterize Alberta's style of kinging, how would you describe it?  
What kinds of cultural factors do you think influence kinging in Alberta?

## Appendix E: Interview Guide (for MW, Audience Member, community member)

### Personal/Intro

Get a sense of where they have lived and what kind of work they've done.

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- What kind of work do you do?
- Have you lived in Edmonton long? What brought you here?
- What other places have you lived besides Edmonton?

### Drag – as performer

- Have you ever performed drag?
- If yes, move to the performer interview guide questions.

### Drag- as audience (past and present)

Get a sense of past and present perceptions drag as well as place and time variations from this person's perspective.

- Can you recall the first time you saw a drag performance? Can you tell me a little bit about it? (probe for first time seeing a drag king performance)
- How would you describe the drag scene during that time? (probe for decades specifically)? (king, queen).
- Do you recall why you went to see drag in the past (before Pride Centre job)? What were the motivations or how did you end up seeing the show?
- What did you get out of drag during that time? What was your favorite thing about going to see drag?
- Do you think drag culture has changed over the years? (queen and king specifically)? If so, how?
- Do you go to drag performances often? Explore this? Where? Why? Who? When?
  - What's your favorite part of going to drag shows now?
  - Explore connections with court here possible
  - Explore charity model of drag possibly
  - Explore drag king specifically

### Drag Kinging

- How would you describe or define a drag king?
- Ask about drag kings in court culture – cismen performing lip-sync with minimal or no costume.
- What do you think is the purpose of drag king performance?
- How would you compare drag kinging to drag queening?

- What made you interested in going to see a drag king performance?
- Do you feel like there are differences between drag shows that are primarily drag king performers vs. drag shows that are primarily drag queens? Can you explain a bit about that?
- Can you tell me about drag king shows that you've seen in Alberta?
  - Probe for Edmonton specifically, AB Beef, Fly Bastards, QR, court.
  - Have you seen drag king shows outside of Edmonton? Outside of Alberta?
  - Have you noticed any differences in kinging between kinging in Alberta and outside Alberta? If yes, can you explain?
  - If you were to characterize Alberta's style of kinging, how would you describe it?
  - What kinds of cultural factors do you think influence kinging in Alberta?
- Have you ever watched a drag king performance in non-queer spaces before? If yes, how do those performances & the watching of such performances compare to those taking place in queer spaces?
- Do you think drag king performance is important? If yes, why do you think this? If yes, for who is it important and why?
- From your perspective, is there any kind of relationship between drag king performance and gender identity or gender expression? If yes, can you describe that relationship? If no, can you explain why you think that?
- From your vantage point, are drag king performances political in any way or are they just a form of entertainment? If political, why do you think this? Can you think of any examples? If entertainment only, why do you think this? Can you think of any examples?

### **Drag, space, and queer community**

Ask interviewee to reflect on both king and queen if there are differences or similarities

- What do you think audiences get out of drag performances? What do you think they can get out of drag king performances in specifically?
- What role do you think audiences play for drag performers? Specifically, for drag kings?
- Do you think drag plays or has played a role in the queer community? If yes, what kind of role does it play? From your perspective, do you think this has changed over time? If yes, how so and why?
  - Has any of this been particularly relevant to your life?
- In general, do you feel safe in drag king performance spaces? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt unsafe at a drag king show or at any drag show? If yes, can you explain? If no, can you explain?

- Do you feel like drag shows are safe spaces? For who? Why? How?
- Have you ever noticed specific things that drag show organizers or performers do to make the space safer or more inclusive? If yes, can you explain?
- What kinds of practices do you think make drag performance spaces safe?

### **Drag and trans experiences**

- What do you make of accusations of misogyny, racism, and transphobia aimed at drag performers?
- Do you feel like drag shows are safe spaces for transgender or genderqueer people (performers or audiences)? Followups.
- Do you feel like drag performances can be offensive to transpeople? Why or why not? Do you feel like this is the case for both drag queen and drag king culture? (Explore further)
- Explore debate around use of word 'tranny' in queen culture (if haven't already)
- Explore how/why some transpeople/communities feel that drag further disenfranchises transpeople.

## **Appendix F: Interview guide for Michael Phair (community member, activist)**

### **Main themes:**

1. Sense of lived experience living in Alberta Canada during the Klein era, as part of lgbttq+ community
2. Sense of what it was like to be an activist during this era (1990s) and changes in political landscape
3. Sense of what it was like to be in government during this era. Inside scoop?
3. Connections to drag kinging and political landscape. Drag kinging as a political tool.

### **Potential questions:**

How do you feel the political environment has changed in regard to gender and sexual minority rights?

What do you think has brought about this shift in Alberta around gender sexuality minority rights?

Have you seen much drag performance in Edmonton? Alberta? (Eras, impressions, experiences)

What role do you think drag has played for the queer community (in Edmonton/Alberta)?

In your experience, do you observe any connections between drag (kinging) and politics in Alberta? Drag kinging used as a political tool?

**Appendix G: Participants' Compiled Demographics (at time of interview)**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Drag Troupe</b>	<b>Education</b>
Mac U. More	31	Caucasian White	hard femme, genderqueer fuck boy	Government social work/ service industry/ sex work/ porn star	Queer Royale	Currently in University for Social Work/Diplo ma in Arts & Cultural Management
Colin Ize	22	Indigenous person	trans	Research assistant/Educat or for fYrefly in Schools	Queer Royale	Bachelor of Arts in English
Johnny Hash	32	Indigenous (Cree/ Métis)	cisgender female	Pipefitter/Bada ss Mom	Queer Royale	Trades, pipefitting
Bushwhackin' Al	28	Mixed race/ Filipino	genderqueer	Child care, odd jobs	Queer Royale	Some university
Niles Jupiter	26	White (Irish & German)	genderqueer/ gender questioning		Queer Royale	High School
Ben Sover	38	White (Ukrainian)	genderqueer/ androgynous	Inner-city non- profit	Queer Royale	MFA
Oscar de La Hymen	41	White	cisgender female	University professor	Alberta Beef	PhD
LJ Steele	34	Caucasian	cisgender male	Insurance	Alberta Beef/ ISCRW	University (theatre)
Randy Packer	40	Canadian	Female	Bricklayer	Alberta Beef	NAIT Red Seal bricklayer & chef
Rusty Nails	39	White/settl er	Genderqueer	Non-for-profit	Alberta Beef	Bachelor of Education
Lil' Mack	38	White	Genderqueer/ Butch (order changes)	University Professor	Alberta Beef/ Sirloins	PhD
Justin Time	39	White	Genderqueer	University Professor	Sirloins	PhD

Jack Strap	39	European	Q	Creative Writer	Fly Bastards	MA
Muff E. Ohso	late 30s/early 40s	Eastern European	Gender doesn't exist	Creative writer for TV	Fly Bastards	At least a bachelor's
DEE	40	White	Male	Teacher	Fly Bastards	MA
Devery Bess	24	Mixed race (half Jamaican/half Scottish)	Female (male in drag)/I don't really care	Server	Fake Mustache Troupe	3 years theatre college
James Dean	34	white	trans guy	Runs Fairytales Queer Film Festival & his own personal training company	Fake Mustache Troupe	High School
Oliver Heart	23	No answer	Gender neutral	Works with children with special needs	Fake Mustache Troupe	University: Special Needs Educational Assistant/Bachelor of Child & Youth Care
MW	59	White	Transmasculine Person	lgbtqt+ community organizer and leader; Pride Centre Director	N/A	unknown
Pony	35	White	Non-binary pony	Writing Tutor/Teacher/Grad Student/Server/Odd Jobs	Ben & Pony/Queer Royale	BA, MS, Currently in PhD
Michael Phair	Over 60	White	Cismale	Activist, City Council Member, Chair of the University of Alberta Board of Governors	N/A	unknown

**Appendix H: Participants' Demographics in separate tables (at time of interview)**

**Age Range of Interviewees**

Age Range	Number of Interviewees
20–29	5
30–39	10 or 11
40–49	3 or 4
50–49	0
60+	2

**Interviewee Race/Ethnicity**

Race/Ethnicity	Number of interviewees	Specific details
White	16	Caucasian; Ukrainian; Irish/German; Canadian; Settler; European
Indigenous	2	Cree/Métis
Mixed Race	2	Filipino; Half-Jamaican/Half Scottish
Eastern European	1	
No answer/unknown	1	

**Table Interviewee Genders**

Gender (self-identified)	Number of interviewees	Specific details
Non-binary (including trans)	13	hard femme, genderqueer fuck boy; genderqueer/gender questioning; genderqueer/androgynous; genderqueer/butch; trans; transguy; gender neutral; female/male in drag/I don't really care; transmasculine person; non-binary pony
Trans	3	Trans; transmasculine person
Cisgender female	3	
Male	2	Biomale, male

Appendix I: “Call for Participants for *Queersummer Night’s Dream*”

**CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS  
DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS JUNE 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013**

To be a part of a *Queersummer’s Night Dream*,  
a performance and art event on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at a wheelchair-accessible venue

Funded by APIRG (Alberta Public Interest Research Group)

**‘Theme’ = transformations, tricksters, dream-states, unexpected couplings, and more!**

*Queer Royale* is a drag performance troupe in Edmonton and the hosts/organizers of this event. For this event, our intention is to showcase art and performance from QTPLGB (Queer, trans\*, pansexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual) communities and invite connection, collaboration and conversation among folks from all aspects of the community. Together with you we would like to create safe(r) performance spaces that are intended to be cooperative, consensual, accessible, and entertaining. We want to invite people to have some good old fashion (and more inclusive) FUN! We also invite people to consider how we experience oppression/discrimination in unique and multiple ways and what accessibility means to us.

Participants will be asked to uphold our safe(r) space guidelines to the best of their ability.

**We would like to invite:** creative types, movers, dancers, performance artists, spoken word, drag kings, queens, poets, multimedia and installation projects, collaborations, and/or something you have in mind that we haven’t thought of! We welcome women, men, transgender people & spirits, those living with a chronic medical condition, visible or invisible, your dreams and desires and passions, your emotions, people who identify as artists, and people who don’t, gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and queer people, humans of all ages, survivors, mystics, seekers, believers of all kinds, humans of all sizes, shades, shapes and abilities.

**If you are interested in participating, please submit the following to [queerroyle@gmail.com](mailto:queerroyle@gmail.com):**

Your name (chosen if you prefer)

A description of what you’d like to do (concept, including anticipated length of time, medium (examples: performance, drag, installation, dance, multimedia, spoken word)

What you would need from us (sound, light, etc).

Any accessible needs, concerns

Two-spirit, trans\* folk, people of color, and people with alternate abilities will be prioritized in the selection of performers. As such, we ask those who benefit from the privileges of whiteness, being able-bodied, cis-gendered and/or settlers self-identify when submitting.

\*Artist fees, free childcare, bus tickets, and free rehearsal space may be available for participants/performers.

## Appendix J: Queer Royale Vision and Mandate

### QUEER ROYALE DRAG TROUPE

**Who we are:** Queer Royale is a drag performance troupe who performs and organizes for queer communities and our allies. We operate under the understanding that there are various and intersecting forms of oppression that directly affect us. Our approach is anti-oppressive in both our creative and collaborative practices. We also love to have good ole inclusive fun.

**Vision:**

We believe in communities and infrastructure that supports safer spaces to explore and express gender.  
We believe in thriving, supportive communities that keep each other accountable while still having all the fun.  
We believe in challenging hierarchy, patriarchy, misogyny, racism, and gender-based violence.  
We believe in physical and cultural accessible spaces.  
We believe in the inclusion of all bodies and genders.  
We believe in opening up discussions around taboos.  
We believe in anti-oppressive art and entertainment.

**Mandate:**

We create and perform drag at various events within and outside of queer communities. We organize events and festivals that support emerging and established creative works (encouraging anti-oppressive practices, evaluating oppressive elements such as cultural appropriation and lyrics). We develop and facilitate workshops for youth and adults around topics such as: drag performance, gender expression, oppression, and safe(r) space practices. We actively look for accessible spaces, ASL interpreters, and ways to fund performers and organizers for their work. Whenever possible, we offer contributing artists and organizers fair wages. We attempt to keep each other accountable. We accommodate all varieties of dragging while acknowledging the diverse/disparate histories of different drag cultures.

## Appendix K: Queer Royale's Safe(r) Space Guidelines

**We like this!** A safer space is a supportive, non-threatening environment that encourages open-mindedness, respect, a willingness to learn from others, as well as physical and mental safety. It is a space that is critical of the power structures that affect our everyday lives.....It's a space that strives to respect and understand survivors' specific needs. Everyone who enters a safer space has a responsibility to uphold the values of the space (<http://saferspacesnyc.wordpress.com/>)

Please read and do your best to uphold these as you participate in the space.

### 1) Respect your own physical, mental and emotional boundaries.

- Stay attuned to your own needs.
- Feel free to leave the event at anytime, for any reason.
- If something doesn't feel right to you (and you can without causing yourself harm), let someone know. You may not be the only one who feels that way.
- If you need help negotiating a situation find a Vibe Watcher to assist you.

### 2) Respect others' emotional, physical and mental boundaries.

- Obtain consent before engaging or touching someone. Never assume consent. Highly intoxicated folks are always considered non-consenting.
- Never assume the race, sexuality, gender, and/or history with violence, etc, of others. Instead ask if someone is open to engaging in dialogue about their own personal identity. Allow folks the right to decline to talk about their identities as well.
- Respect the pronouns and names of others. This is a space were everyone should feel free and empowered to choose their own gender and expression.
- Respect the confidentiality of others.
- Any individual or group engaging in violence (including sexual violence or harassment) or who threatens another's safety within the space will automatically be excluding themselves. We will ask them to leave the space.

### 3) This is a cooperative learning environment.

- We are all here to learn and share. We all have something to offer.
- Clarifying questions are encouraged.
- Share ideas rather than judgments. Respect diverse opinions and beliefs.
- Use "I" statements as much as possible when talking about your experiences.
- Assume positive intent.
- Everyone (including you) will make unintentional mistakes.
- Be accountable. Be aware of the effects on your behavior on others.
- Expect to be confronted by others when you make mistakes.

For more info contact [queerroyale@gmail.com](mailto:queerroyale@gmail.com) ☺ or check out:

<http://saferspacesnyc.wordpress.com/>

<http://idke.org/about-2/accessibility-and-awareness/safer-space-guidelines/>

<http://idke.org/about-2/accessibility-and-awareness/performancesafespace/sissycollective.org>

## Appendix L: Tips for creating Safe(r) Spaces while Performing

When we step on a stage, we are entering a big conversation between ‘performers’ and ‘audience’. As performers, we are representing ourselves, and sometimes our communities. To create a safe(r), inclusive space for everyone, performers/participants in *Queersummer Night’s Dream* have considered the following guidelines.

### Things to keep in mind:

- 1) Your voice: Who are you? What makes you who you are?
- 2) Your message: What do you want to say? How do you want to say it?
- 3) Your image: How do you want to present yourself? How does it represent who you are? How do your actions/movements support your message?
- 4) Your backgrounds: Where did you come from? Who is your family? What are your cultures and your communities? How does this influence your message?

### Things to think about:

- 1) **Cultural Appropriation:** Presenting or adopting specific elements such as clothing, music, or behaviors from any culture or group that may not be your own on the basis of stereotype OR using said elements in order to present yourself as a member of a cultural group that may not be your own. Each person has the ability to define what cultural elements are parts of their lives; please use care when using cultural-based components for your piece(s).
- 2) **Triggering Elements:** Some performance content, such as re-enacted violence, accounts of aggression, and/or prejudicial (sexist, racist, transphobic, ableist, homophobic, queerphobic, classist, etc) language may upset or distress certain audience members. Appropriate warnings will be given by the emcee and ASL interpreters. This way we can empower story telling while also providing space for attendees to care for themselves.
- 3) **Disempowering Characters:** Characters or performative elements, costumes, or themes that belittle or insult any group by using stereotypes or disempowering presentations that target size, age, sexual orientation, race, gender presentation, physical (dis)ability, economic class, education, ethnicity, or other aspects of personal identity or community grouping.

### Things to remember:

- 1) You are unique: Only you can tell your story, your voice is priceless.
- 2) You are brave: Sharing your art means sharing yourself, and that can be scary!
- 3) You are important: Art is a way to connect with others on a deeper level.
- 4) You are powerful: Performing an amazing act of strength and love.

Thanks to JAC Stringer, *Midwest GenderQueer*, (2011) “Promoting Activism through Gender Performance”

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<sup>i</sup>Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> According to Danielle Peers, this film was made for four specific audiences: “1) our own Edmonton queer scene from which this troupe emerged ... as a means of reflecting on the artistic and political practice in a way that would be available and useful both to academic and non-academic contingents of the troupe and the larger community. We chose to debut the film at the Exposure festival at the Metro Cinema and sold out the theatre. It was really FOR this community, more than anything; 2) classroom use: it was designed to use as a teaching tool in classrooms. A number of the troupe members and the filmmakers have tried teaching gender performance, and are left with videos that often take an unproblematized, celebratory, or freak show approach to the subject matter; 3) queer film circuit. To try to get more troubling and challenging politicized work into these festivals. This was more or less successful—a number of self-proclaimed queer festivals not only played the film, but a couple even headlined the film (one on a Saturday night), whereas most “gay and lesbian” festivals wouldn’t touch the film with a 10-foot pole. We hadn’t ever had that divide with our other films, so that was really interesting; 4) to add to the relatively small archive of drag king performances that academics and queer archivists and artists have access to. And to ways of reading and responding to these performances. It seemed like a way to capture and engage with a particular kind of creative explosion that crystallized in this community at a particular moment in time. So that more could be explored, academically, through it. So it was designed to be a bit in conversation, academically, with Bobbie Noble and Jack Halberstam, etc. Simply writing an article on this is actually a bit problematic because, unlike much cultural studies stuff, others wouldn’t have had access to see the stuff we were writing about, and so would not have been able to really converse with the work. As it is, I know of a couple of publications coming out, soon, that will engage with explorations of the performances of the troupe, and the film about it. So, I think this medium was really useful to exploring a cultural phenomenon that isn’t otherwise widely available” (Peers, 2011).