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**Proliferating Masculinities: New York Drag King Shows**

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A body appears in the penumbra of a half-lit bar and starts swinging its hips to the rhythm of an Elvis Presley song. She is the King! Screams and laughter from the patrons cheer the performance on. The drag king show is on. This paradoxical and unstable performance is reminiscent of the drag queen spectacle as lip-synching is often the rule. The female-gendered body is also tempered with masculine suits, facial hair, references to icons and exaggerated physical movements. Similarly stage names signal the genre: Mo B Dick, Sir Real, John D. Arc, Mario Testosteroni or Texas Tomboy. So what are drag king shows about? How do they intervene in the debates about masculinity?

Within gender discourses it has become clear today that masculinity can be detached from a biological male body and “compulsory heterosexuality.”<sup>1</sup> Or is it that clear? Despite some flexibility brought to the definition of masculinity<sup>2</sup>, the links between sex, gender and sexuality still follow a dominant narrative<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, masculinity remains subjected to a set of rather fixed characteristics even though many forms of masculinities are practiced culturally. That is why it remains necessary to explore and expand the masculinities that can challenge the dominant narrative based on the privileged position of the white male heterosexual, which is sanctified through its invisibility. This effort can be carried out by looking at the practices of female masculinity as defined by Judith Halberstam when she writes: “I am using the topic of female masculinity to explore a queer subject position that

can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity.” (Halberstam, 9) The androgyne, the tribade, the female husband, the invert, the butch, the transgender and drag kings are the female masculinities deployed in Halberstam’s book. They are completed in Leslie Feinberg’s 2006 novel *Drag King Dreams*: “drag kings, tranny bois, transmen, butches, he-she’s, morphers, gender-benders, bi-genders, shape shifters, cross-dressers, Two Spirits...” (Feinberg, 158)

Among female masculinities, drag king performances appear to be especially relevant to explore the terms of the *representation* of female masculinity in the United States at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Halberstam offers a simple definition: “A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume.” (Halberstam, 232) Indeed, drag kings address the representation of masculinity as displayed by a female body, or rather, they question the possibility of such a performance. They also question the framing device of theatricality and the potential blurring between a theatrical performance and a non-theatrical one. Drag kings finally raise the issue of the effects of such performances. Parody may be the trope that can best help us tease out the effects of drag kings on the performance of masculinity. They also raise the question of how the theatrical context can provide a reflection on the notion of visibility, which is crucial to that of gender and sex representations. Drag kings, then, offer a proliferation of masculinities by invoking both a specular logic and a creative act.

### *Framing drag king performances*

Female masculinity is not new on stage<sup>4</sup>. Male cross-dressing has a long history that participates in a genealogy of representation of masculinity by women. Charlotte Cushman’s *Romeo*<sup>5</sup> famously exemplified this practice on the nineteenth-century American stage. Closer to the drag king shows, the popular *Jewel Box Revue*, with its unique male drag *Stormé Delarverie*<sup>6</sup> (from 1955 to 1969) provides another stratum to the layers that have been constructing female masculinities through time. Yet drag kings only significantly emerged in the 1990s (Halberstam, 232), while drag

queens have long been a widespread feature of male femininity on stage. As was the case with Stormé Delarverié, drag kings and drag queens have often shared common stages despite the predominance of the latter. There seems to be a commonality in the cross-dressing of both genders that has the ability to produce common – although not altogether similar – effects on the gender system.

These common effects can be analyzed through “gender parody” after Butler’s seminal, if controversial, analysis of drag (Butler 1990, 138)<sup>7</sup>. “Gender parody” has often been the privileged term for drag queen shows, but I believe it is also a valid term for drag kings, despite the resistance it has been met with, and what it says about female masculinity. This resistance has manifested itself through the rejection of the term “camp”<sup>8</sup> as a possible trope to understand the theatrical butch-femme couple and, later, drag kings (Davy<sup>9</sup>, Feinberg & Halberstam). Although the historical argument that camp is associated with gay male history and drag queens is convincing, the term “camp” has also been expanded, famously by Susan Sontag<sup>10</sup>, and also more recently by theater scholar Sue-Ellen Case<sup>11</sup> or performance artist Holly Hughes, in a way that can accommodate drag kings.

Parody, although less specific, avoids this bone of contention and allows us to return to Butler’s gender-inclusive use of the term: “The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities.” (Butler 1990, 137) Butler here aligns all those practices because they have the potential to disrupt the “gender as usual” performance. Can this analysis be applied to drag kings – who, interestingly enough, were not mentioned by Butler even though drag king workshops did exist in New York? Parody for Butler is an imitation that “reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect – that is, in its effects – postures as an imitation.” (Butler 1990, 138) The parody deployed by drag kings, then, can also work along those postmodern lines by producing critical effects – thus evoking Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody: “Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”<sup>12</sup>

Butler also underlines the necessity to take into consideration the context of production of parody to be able to evaluate its subversive potential. This raises the question of what makes drag kings potentially subversive of the contemporary gender system. In the 1980s and 1990s the drag queen scene was booming and encouraged the production of other forms of gender bending, on and off stage. This can explain why drag kings could emerge around that period at a time when masculinity became more acceptable for many lesbians<sup>13</sup>. The popularity of the film *Paris Is Burning* (1990), directed by Jennie Livingstone, who documented the drag balls phenomenon in Harlem, illustrates the fascination for gender explorations. This multiplication of gender and sexual configurations furthered feminist and queer reflections on the sex wars. Even if that same year Butler highlighted the significance of drag by suggesting that: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.” (Butler, 1990, 137), it did not imply that the meaning of drag was settled. Drag king, as drag queen, shows did not become automatically critical of the binary gender system. Yet, within the thriving bar and street culture of cross-dressing, gender bending and transgenderism, many drag artists grew aware of their critical position toward any restrictive vision of gender.

The production context of the drag king shows contributes to this critical move—and also its potential failure to be critical. First, drag king shows do not often take place in a legitimate theater, but rather in bars, like the weekly show “Club Casanova” at the Cake in the East Village in New York City, or in small performing spaces such as the WOW Café, a primarily lesbian theater in the same neighborhood, or in temporary spaces for a special drag king night—a contest in a club, for instance. Those spaces suggest a closer connection of the drag king shows with vaudeville and drag balls. As such, they are performances designed to entertain their audience, who did not necessarily come primarily to see that show. Drag king performances, then, are not part of the conventional Broadway world but they do participate in the theatrical world through the notion of “performance.” The liminality which characterizes performance art resonates with the game that drag kings play, between reality and representation, between one category and another. The makeshift

platforms, the faulty sound system and the cracking soundtrack for the lip-synching numbers highlight the precarious nature of the performance but reflect the essence of the drag king show. Gender parody here, understood as a playful rendition of masculinity, perfectly fits this production context, signaling and mocking the disjuncture between sex and gender like drag queen shows. While the drag queen quotes femininity and drag kings quote masculinity, they exaggerate the codes used to assign gender. As always with parody<sup>14</sup>, the recirculation of a text (that gender is natural) in order to twist it takes the risk of repeating the normative discourse rather than debunking it.

In her study of drag kings, Halberstam qualifies this ambivalence by resorting to a presentation that nonetheless yields a number of contradictions. Under the influence of the anthropological work of Esther Newton, and also echoing the idea of “categories” used in the drag balls, Halberstam suggests, on the one hand, that her interviews with drag kings led her to conclude that they did not offer a strong case for a subversive intent. This idea was largely based on their rejection of another form of female masculinity embodied by the butch. Halberstam, on the other hand, through her typology (“Butch Realness,” “Femme Pretender,” “Male Mimicry,” “Fag Drag,” and “Denaturalized Masculinity”) implicitly reverses this by conferring strong potential on the butch version of the drag king, “Butch Realness” (Halberstam, 246-55), and, above all, by undoing her own categories. Indeed, strangely enough, Halberstam’s typology points at a general failure of the drag king potential while presenting it to us as a new form of female masculinity. Each category seems to more or less directly siphon off the drag king power to achieve a Butlerian subversion of gender. There seems to be an erasing of the drag king category even while it is being constructed.

The first category, “Butch realness,” is presented as “an authentic or unadorned and unperformed masculinity” (Halberstam, 246) but in the end most “participants did not necessarily identify as drag kings” (Halberstam, 246). So clearly “Butch Realness” becomes less convincing as a category to understand drag kings, especially if we bear in mind the epistemological border conflict between butches and drag kings. Halberstam’s comment that there is absolutely no theatricality in the

picture she selected to illustrate “Butch Realness” (Figure 31), as opposed to her illustration of “Femme Pretender” (Figure 32), reveals that indeed the viewer and the identification processes should be more clearly addressed. It seems to me that both pictures display masculine theatricality, which is after all not surprising as those pictures are part of an artistic project about drag kings. If they do not offer the same type of masculinity, they certainly are signs of a performance of masculinity, as Sean’s painted goatee (Figure 31) echoes the more thickly drawn goatee of Chico Soda (Figure 32). Sean’s direct gaze at the photographer—and thus at the viewers—once again signals a pose that plays on the proud presence of the male gaze. “Male Mimicry” is another self-defeating category. It is illustrated by Diane Torr’s workshops, in which women can become men for a day. It is also constructed as outside the realm of drag kings: “The workshop, obviously, has little to do with drag kings or kinging” (Halberstam, 252). Halberstam’s “Femme Pretender” category is another negative embodiment of the drag king as it is first described as “ironic and camp,” whereas Halberstam has tried to differentiate camp from drag kings by using the term “kinging.”<sup>15</sup> This slippery distinction is not necessarily a problem. However, here it does produce a problematic conclusion: “Ultimately, femme drag kings tend to use drag as a way to, as Buster Hymen puts it, ‘walk both sides of the gender fence,’ and this tends to reassert a stable binary definition of gender.” (Halberstam, 250). By offering a built-in fixed effect of one type of drag king in her “taxonomy of female masculinities” (Halberstam, 253), Halberstam tends to preclude any subversive potential of that form of female masculinity—and maybe to a larger extent of all drag kings.

Her last category, however, seems to redeem all those failures as it cuts across her previous types—but in that sense it is not a category at all. “Denaturalized Masculinity” operates more as a process than as a circumscribed group, as its verbal nature indicates. In that sense, it gains in subversive potential, the potential to de-essentialize gender as substance. The performer who illustrates Halberstam’s point, Dred, is a convincing choice. Indeed, looking at one of Dred’s performances, we can begin to see the potential effects of drag kings and find ways to address how “male nonperformativity” (Halberstam, 255) can be parodied after all.

### *From double asymmetrical erasing to multiplying masculinities*

Anthropologist Esther Newton, who famously studied drag queens<sup>16</sup> in the United States in the 1960s can just recall one single drag king:

As one segment of a drag queen contest I witnessed in the late sixties in Chicago, there was a 'drag king' competition (and although I wrote earlier that this term was never used then, I seem to remember 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. (quoted in Halberstam, 301)

This hesitant memory, or rather, corrective memory, could illustrate the difficulty for the drag king to resist erasing. This problem, as we have suggested, is also encountered in the more recent efforts to chart drag kings at a time when Halberstam manages to create a partially self-defeating architecture of female masculinity. This might be based on the very way visibility and invisibility are framed within American culture.

Indeed, "within the realm of the visible [...] women are seen always as Other; thus, *The Woman* cannot be seen."<sup>17</sup> To this impossible visibility of the woman must be added that of the unmarked male body. So female masculinity seems to cause a double asymmetrical erasing of female and male bodies through gender performances. This complicated arithmetic of gender visibility might explain a number of negating processes that are difficult not to repeat as soon as one tries to comprehend the performance of female masculinity. As Butler has suggested, "the parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance." (Butler, 1990, 146) So drag kings might have the potential to contradict the essentializing move toward the normative narrative associating masculinity with maleness or nonperformativity and femininity with artifice or "masquerade"<sup>18</sup>—merely registering the impossibility of seeing women. How can any visibility be created from this double erasing?

As has been discussed elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> gay masculinities and black masculinities are often used to expose masculinity's codes because they have been constructed as failing masculinities—failing in the sense that they are visible. Yet in that analysis there remains the idea of a certain ontological justification to the extent that it is implied that gays and black males are defined as biologically male. Female masculinities, even if they play with those masculinities, on the contrary allow for a more easily denaturalized masculinity because they are not defined as biologically male. Yet this logic remains based on a sex/gender ontology. It is when such equations remain undecidable that there might be a breach into the ontological effect of the sex/gender dominant fiction. This is precisely where the theatrical performance intervenes as it has the power to play with all those equations for the sake of art. The purpose is not to validate a sex/gender configuration as the character on stage remains for the audience a character playing with the dominant fiction. The character's very purpose is to never provide an ontological answer to the questions s/he raises. All is false in the parody of masculinity even if the drag king performance crosses over the stage to the street. However, it does not mean that this mirror does not reflect and give a new spin on the identities practiced and formed in a world where the body matters. By managing to conjure up a visible parody of masculinity, drag kings multiply masculinities. By multiplying the angles of representation, drag king shows may provide a glimpse of a world where gender would be deregulated. In other words, their performance of invisible masculinity is based on the mirror dimension of theater which mocks and echoes the "imaginary real" through distortion and misrepresentation. As a result, or simultaneously, drag kings create visible forms that contest the reproduction of the dominant fiction that allows a normative repetition of masculinity (Silverman, 48).

The playful ambiguity of quoting masculinity by pasting a fake mustache, overdoing the abruptness of a gesture, securing too carefully the visibility of a bulge in the pants highlights the performance of masculinity. The borrowing of codes attached to drag queens, butches, fags, transgenders but also heterosexuals is there to multiply the signs that conjure up masculinity as a plural form rather than a singular essence. The very act of quoting masculinity appears through multiple references to



stars (Elvis, Puff Daddy, etc.), to typically male jobs such as policeman and sailor, to accessories (biological elements considered to be male, such as facial hair, penis, or sartorial ones like business suits and fedoras). All these devices serve the parody of masculinity to win a laugh from the audience, but also to titillate through transgression, pleasure and eroticism.

Dred's show at the WOW Café<sup>20</sup> can illustrate all these aspects of the drag king performance. This piece was staged as a solo performance, more elaborate than a gig on a stage in a bar. Indeed, Dred's early presence<sup>21</sup> on the drag king scene has made her one of the best known drag kings in New York. Dred (Daring Reality Every Day, aka Mildred Gerestant), by embodying some of the famous icons of black culture, makes her audience laugh and creates the eroticism of the parodic transgression typical of successful drag kings—although clearly not all drag kings look alike and signify in the same way.

At the beginning of the scene, Dred constructs her masculinity in front of her audience by putting on a dark suit, a top hat and dark glasses. Her narrated fear of the effect of constructing masculinity, highlighted by the laughter in the audience, makes explicit the anxiety linked to gender transgression, but at the same time suggests the opening of a pleasurable space whereby transformation is made possible. This transformation is framed by the stage and its conventions. Dred plays with this as she states to her audience: "I'm nervous because I've never performed before." The audience probably knows this is false, as Dred's expertise at "kinging" is well known (she was featured in the documentary about drag kings, *Venus Boyz* (Baur, 2002)). This knowledge can reassure the audience that she will be able to overcome her fear and theirs. The imitation of the world off stage, the mimetic mechanism of theater, provides a springboard to launch the drag king into existence.

The ambivalence of that transformation is played up by the paradoxical mockery of men when Dred states "I'm too pretty to pass as a man." This "joke" highlights that the point is not to confirm the link between man and masculinity but to create another kind of masculinity based on genderfuck. This sense of creation is ironically voiced by a grand: "Dred is born" accompanied by more abrupt shoulder and hip moves conveying her female masculinity. This parody of the performative

phrase "It's a boy" at birth doubled by the performance of bodily signs of corporeal masculinity, do indeed operate a denaturalization of masculinity and suggest the performativity of gender as described by Butler and others.

The anxiety of such an unmasking is allayed by the typical ingredient of a drag king performance, that is to say a lip-synch number. This device deploys the humorous dimension of parody, where the original text, here the rap song "It's All About the Benjamins" by Puff Daddy and Lil' Kim, is recirculated with a twist, here Dred's physical version of it. We can identify a number of operations that can help point to the implications of such an act. First, the effect is comic because of the reappropriation of the male rapper image by Dred. The switch from her "natural" voice to a rapper's voice points at the difference between the original and the copy. The singer's deeper voice signals a typical gender clue to enforce the distinction between genders. But it does more; it reveals that there is an expectation of such a difference that is in fact regulatory. If such a norm is not respected, then it creates a jarring effect which makes the audience laugh—possibly to thwart a gender anxiety. So the performance exposes the regulatory norm that produces gender. A similar process can be said to work for gestures. This process however is rendered pleasurable through the music that diverts the seriousness of the revelation through artistic mediation.

The exaggeration provided by the parodic position becomes a safety-valve that helps negotiate the realization that what defines the coherence of the body, gender, might not be fully reliable. It is after all another aspect of parody to be a conciliatory move, as Hutcheon writes: "In this sense parody might be said to be, at heart, less an aggressive than a conciliatory rhetorical strategy, building upon more than attacking its other, while still retaining its critical distance." (Hutcheon, xiv.) This exaggeration is physically embodied by Dred's choreography for the song, including her arm punching the air in the direction of the audience, aggressively taking up more space. The choreography seems to reach its climax when Dred pointedly moves her hips and highlights the bulging form in her pants. The penis mockery points to the ultimate biological argument of masculinity and debunks it as

a careful performance of manliness. In other words, the penis alone cannot contain masculinity and as the show goes on, this revelation cannot claim to be a true climax.

Beyond the mimetic, this points to the other side of performance whereby the performers create their own referentiality as the piece is being performed. Phelan distinguishes representation from performance: "Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Performance, insofar as it can be defined as representation without reproduction, can be seen as a model for another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other *as* the Same is not assured." (Phelan, 3) It seems to me that Dred's act plays on both terms but obviously the subversion relies on the performance's potential to destabilize. The artist's oscillation between femininity and masculinity in her act is what alters the mimetic mode of representation and signals the gender norms. In other terms, Dred is both the character of a normative fiction, that of the binary gender system, and, simultaneously, a contestation of that narrative. The impossibility of stabilizing her gender on stage entails the impossibility to stabilize an imitation of an offstage reality.

Dred's questions to the audience make it clear: "What is a natural woman? What is a natural man? I don't really have a set definition for masculine or feminine. And I don't really need one. I feel the world would be a better place if we didn't have a set definition. [...] It's natural to be different." Dred, by wearing artificial signs of both genders (a fake beard, a painted mustache, a wig with long hair) and performing various corporeal masculine and feminine moves, embodies her words. The fact that this time her lip-synching number uses a song by Aretha Franklin ("Natural Woman") further complicates a simplistic identification of her position within one or two gender positions. All gender signs then become artificial and cannot uphold two-party gender politics. Dred's lip-synching of "Natural woman" is accompanied by a strip-tease where she reveals once more the promise of a penis in her underwear.

Then the playful conjuring up of the cultural collapse of the penis into the phallus<sup>22</sup>, of the confusion of maleness and non-performativity (Halberstam, 234) by suggesting that anyone can pack a penis<sup>23</sup>, underscores a version of female

masculinity that truly parodies the linkage of the dominant sex/gender fiction. This debunking of the penis/phallic order through dildos is a common feature of drag king performances and may be the most evident operation of making masculinity visible. The detachable plastic penis becomes an *operation* as Preciado suggested: “The dildo is not an object but a cutting operation. It is a displacement of the allegedly organic center of sexual production into a space outside of the body.”<sup>24</sup> As such, it exposes the process that yokes together penis and phallus or maleness and masculinity. The dildo size competition at the drag king performance at Velvet, an East Village bar, in 1997, is yet another example of the parodic process through exaggeration—which one could literally measure. First, the imitation of the classical penis anxiety through an object points at its ridiculous nature. Secondly, the ever growing size of the dildos marks them as parodic—thus creating critical distance through laughter. The realization that the body can be potentially cut and pasted as exemplified through the display of dildos underscores the performative and historical processes constructing masculinity. By mocking a biologically grounded male anxiety about the size of one’s penis (reflecting either castration anxieties or, in other terms, a desire for more phallic power) the drag kings sever the phallus from the penis. They displace its ontological marking in the penis and empower themselves by making the dildo—the mark of the transferability of the phallus—up for grabs by anyone. What is the implication of this?

Within the logic of representation, it has been asserted many times that masculinity cannot be performed, or that masculinity is precisely defined by invisibility. But this view, it seems to me, repeats the conflation of the penis with the phallus—the latter being placed beyond gender<sup>25</sup>. If the phallus is the “nonsensical signifier that kills all meaning”<sup>26</sup> then the penis is not. Here the display of dildos, instead of maintaining the *denial* of castration (that is to say, the entrance into the symbolic for traditional masculinity), embraces castration to thwart the conflation of the phallus with the penis. Female masculinity disputes the traditional masculinity based on this denial (Silverman, 46) and frees masculinity from the dominant gender fiction that organizes the subject. This is made possible by the very existence of such performances, that do not repeat the dominant gender fiction (binary opposition

between genders), but multiply the questions addressed to the mechanism of masculinity. Furthermore, the dildo highlights the “synechdochal logic” (Butler 1993, 81) at the heart of the relation between the organs and the phallus. If the stage is the privileged locus for synecdoche, then such a stage is indeed ideal to support Butler’s criticism of the phallus. By swinging their dildos around, the drag kings, at best, reconfigure the penis/phallus articulation and point out that the “phallus is fundamentally transferable” (Butler 1993, 82-83). This effect is not due to the presence of the dildos in and of themselves but to their parodic appropriation by the drag kings. By making the dildo a parodic spectacle, the performance can produce unlimited transfer of the phallus. Such an operation entails a destabilization of the “masculine” and the “feminine” that is signified by drag king performances.

Dred’s performance of 1960s and 1970s black masculinity poses yet another set of questions about the processes constructing masculinity. Dred bends over by the rack where her costumes hang and puts on a gigantic wig. The immediately recognizable Afro style which in the 1960s was connected to “black is beautiful” is associated with the music of the 1971 blaxploitation movie *Shaft* (Gordon Parks). The hyper-masculinity displayed in those movies, just as the one mentioned earlier with gangsta rap, is mocked here through the drag king performance. The oversize wig (another phallic game) also echoes, within the New York City context, the same practice by drag queens that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s with the drag queen festival, Wigstock<sup>27</sup>. The wig’s unstable meaning indicates that gender is never the result of one factor, no matter how essentialized it is. The wig is both a metonymy of the biological (hair) and of the social (fashionable haircut). Gender, like the wig, is informed by both perspectives. Interestingly enough here, the Afro was both a masculine and feminine practice. As a result, Dred and the drag kings who often use wigs point at the many operations that are socially and biologically applied indifferently to both genders—even within a binary gender system. This quite plainly emphasizes the failure of the binary logic and its defense mechanism: disavowal. Disavowal turns all the signs that are not gendered in and of themselves into a blind spot through its YES - BUT NO structure. YES the Afro can be a sign of masculinity or femininity BUT biology remains the source of sexual difference. This

gender disavowal is here sustained by a racial disavowal: YES the Afro is racialized BUT white people can also wear an Afro. The disavowal then tries to reconfigure the difference into the same (Yes there are more than two genders but no there are only two genders/Yes American history has created a black race but there is no racial difference) in order to ward off any potential trouble in the dominant fiction. The racial component here raises other interesting questions about the articulation of gender and race. Halberstam points at the fact that racialized masculinity is more visible and thus explains the success of African-American drag kings like Dred. The idea that the most privileged position in the dominant gender fiction is occupied by white masculinity has been analyzed frequently. As a consequence, if female masculinity manages to expose “masculinity as masquerade” (Silverman, 47) by disjoining it from the phallus, the racialized gendering of the body should also be exposed. It is true that the focus of the drag king performance is the sex/gender axis but it does not presume a hierarchical structure in the production of the subject through performance. The idea that race makes masculinity more visible runs the risk of re-circulating the notion that gender is a more determining factor (Silverman 23, 35) in the production of the subject.<sup>28</sup> This would entail a repetition of the dominant racial fiction, instead of its debunking. It seems that Dred, by performing drag king blackness with the Afro, parodies such a vision. First, Dred’s shaved head questions habitual links between race and gender, exploring instead how the gendered Afro could produce race or the racialized Afro could produce gender. By using the oversize Afro wig, she underscores that the body is constituted through racial and gender cultural markers. By resorting to black popular culture she addresses her own racial production on stage and how it inflects the kind of female masculinity she is expected to produce. Claiming that she does what she does because it is a more visible form of masculinity, it seems to privilege sexual difference in subject formation. Such a move might be seen to establish a hierarchy and permit a divide and rule strategy favoring the dominant fiction. On the contrary, Dred’s performance reminds us that no such hierarchy in subject formation should be established if the dominant fiction is to be disputed efficiently. Rather Dred’s

production of black female masculinity feeds on the proliferation of identities as a strategy against the binary logic that is always hierarchized<sup>29</sup>.

The erotic games in Dred's performance through the display of her muscles, her hip swinging and other bulges participate fully in that proliferation. The risk here, as in any parody, is that the show may be misread as a confirmation of the supremacy of the penis as figurative of the phallus and that at best it only evokes penis envy and the desire for a normative heterosexuality. Yet if, as has been suggested, the performance can create a gap in the repetitive process that constitutes the sex/gender/sexuality fiction, then it can provide for a contestation of restrictive norms and produce a proliferation of representations that derail the fantasy of pure phallic power based on a privileged position. By contradicting the normative story, drag kings question the very mechanisms that support an ahistorical production of subjectivity and raise doubts about the mimetic power of theater to expand the performance's potential to focus on productive creations. This is also possible because drag kings are not only about gender parody of masculinity but also about the representational forms that command the dominant narratives about subject formation including sex and sexualities. That is why they also parody racialized masculinities, heterosexual masculinities, gay masculinities, feminine masculinities, masculine masculinities.

The way drag kings de-essentialize gender is by offering multiple figures of bodily enactments of gender. The effects of those performances are a proliferation and complexification of gendered and sexualized identities as, for instance, gay masculinity expands through the eroticism of the drag king. This makes it clear that gay masculinity is not limited by a biological definition that sees homosexuality as a mere equation of a man desiring another man (Edwards, 80-85). Thus we can see how female masculinity, through drag king performances, manages to deregulate the sex/gender/sexuality triad of a dominant fiction by opening up possibilities. Lesbian desire, more commonly associated with female masculinity, finds in drag king performances a potentially erotic image that complicates a univocal understanding of lesbian sexuality, often mediated through the historical figure of the butch-femme couple. Again, the drag kings, despite their reluctant assimilation to the butch model

(Halberstam), point at the process of multiplying desire rather than limiting it to a couple of models.<sup>30</sup> If drag kings manage to exceed their performance, then their subversive potential can be fully realized.

The butch-femme couple, male cross-dressers, drag kings are different cultural productions that explore and circulate female masculinities. Transgenderism could obviously be a cultural practice that avoids a reified understanding of gender. All those terms and many others remind us of the variety of practices that participate in the density of gender terms. To let them thrive is far more preferable than to argue for a subsuming term that would necessarily elide some fantasized realities. Yet, it seems to me that drag kings offer a number of characteristics within the frame of theatrical performances (parody, exaggeration, the articulation of the mimetic and the performance) that help address and reveal the way female masculinity expands the question of the performance of invisible masculinity.

Drag kings rework gender through parody, reappropriation, quotation, cutting, excess, and abolish or upset the border between the mimetic and productive performance. They reinvent masculinity to finish off the repetition of the binary gender system not merely through utopia but through a proliferation of gender on stage. True, binary logic helps grasp a certain kind of reality but it is a far cry from the real.<sup>31</sup> As Butler suggests, the failure of gender norms reveals the fantasmatic nature of the real and allows the proliferation of “gender configurations.” (Butler 1990, 146) Drag kings, by reopening access to the real through new fantasies, expand humanity. Binary gender is dead, long live the proliferation of genders, the king is dead, long live the drag king.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in Henry Abelove, Michèle Barale, David Halperin, eds. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader.* New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 227-254. Reprinted from Adrienne Rich. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1978-1985.* New York: Virago Press and W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986.

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- <sup>2</sup> See for example a survey of the various trends and evolutions of Masculinity Studies, in Tim Edwards. *Cultures of Masculinity*. New York & London: Routledge, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> See the development of that term in Kaja Silverman. *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York & London: Routledge, 1992, 15-51.
- <sup>4</sup> Laurence Senelick, "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural origins of glamour drag and male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage," in Lesley Ferris, ed. *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 80-95.
- <sup>5</sup> Denise A. Walen, "'Such a Romeo as We Had Never Ventured to Hope For' Charlotte Cushman," in Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra, eds. *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998, 41-62.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Drorbaugh, "Sliding Scales: Notes on Stormé DeLarverie and the Jewel Box Revue, the cross-dressed woman on the contemporary stage, and the invert," in Lesley Ferris, ed. *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 120-143.
- <sup>7</sup> Butler's analysis of the effects of drag also evokes a less known text published the same year that evidences that she was aware of a number of issues specific to performance, as she refers to seminal works on the issue such as Turner & Schechner, as well as the definitions of "transvestism" "in the theater" and "on the street." Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in Sue-Ellen Case, ed. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, 270-282.
- <sup>8</sup> See for instance Moe Meyer, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994.
- <sup>9</sup> Kate Davy. "Fe/Male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," in Moe Meyer, ed. *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994, 130-48.
- <sup>10</sup> "Notes on Camp," in Susan Sontag. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador, 1966, 275-92.
- <sup>11</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic", in Lynda Hart, ed. *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989, 294-295. See also my own reflections on the theatrical practice of lesbian camp: "Le camp lesbien des Five Lesbian Brothers," *Etudes Anglaises*, 61-3 (2008), Klincksieck, 330-338.
- <sup>12</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985/2000, 6.
- <sup>13</sup> See Lauren Wells Hasten. *Gender Pretenders: A Drag King Ethnography*. Department of Anthropology, Columbia University in the City of New York, February 1999. <<http://www.laurenhasten.com/genderpretenders.htm>> (downloaded August 2, 2011). Hasten, by describing the strong reaction against Shelly Mars's performance at the East Coast Lesbian Festival, also reminds us of the limits to that attitude.
- <sup>14</sup> For a historical account of this notion see Margaret A. Rose. *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- <sup>15</sup> "Performances of humorous masculinity demand another term, not only to distinguish them from the camp humor of femininity but also to avoid, as Newton warns, the conflation of drag and camp with butch-femme. I want to propose the term "kinging" for drag humor associated with masculinity." Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 238.
- <sup>16</sup> Esther Newton. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972/1979.
- <sup>17</sup> Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 6.

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<sup>18</sup> “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.” Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a masquerade,” (1929), in Athol Hughes, ed. *The Inner World and Joan Riviere, Collected Papers: 1920-1958*. London & New York: Karnac Books, 1991, 94.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Chapter 4 and 5 in Edwards, *op.cit.*, 64-98.

<sup>20</sup> The show took place in January 2002. It can be seen on youtube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOCYkaT1sdk>>. Accessed in May 2011. Video posted June 8, 2008. Filmed by Moira Cutler at the WOW Cafe.. In the meantime the performer’s name has changed to LIGHT, personal email with author, August 2, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Dred first became first famous in 1996 when she won the King of Manhattan contest at the He/She Bar.

<sup>22</sup> See a discussion of this “misrecognition upon which masculinity is founded,” in Silverman, *op.cit.*, 42-8.

<sup>23</sup> Packing “[...] is the practice of stuffing one's pants with an object, referred to as a ‘packy,’ that is meant to pass for a penis,” in Hasten, *op.cit.* There are several ways of packing and sometimes drag kings use other objects than a dildo or a sock. Dred was known for using an apple playing with the sign some more.

<sup>24</sup> Beatriz Preciado. *Le Manifeste contra-sexuel*. Paris: Balland, 1999, 66. (translation Randal S. Biddle and Xavier Lemoine)

<sup>25</sup> Butler summarizes Lacan’s explanation: “And, yet, curiously and significantly, in Lacan’s essay on ‘The Signification of the Phallus,’ he will deny that the phallus is either an organ or an imaginary effect; it is a ‘privileged signifier.’” Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex.’* New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 70. She later quotes: “It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes.” *Ibid.*, 82. It is worth noticing that Butler does not discuss the fact that Lacan mentions the “clitoris.” So the phallus also symbolizes the clitoris. If this seems to maintain the binary of sexual difference it also suggests that the phallus is associated with femininity as well.

<sup>26</sup> Lynda Hart. *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994, 159. Lacan’s definition: “The phallus is our term for the signifier of his (sic) [the subject’s] alienation in signification.” “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet,” trans. James Hulbert, *Yale French Studies*, nos. 55&56 (1977), 28, quoted in Silverman, *op.cit.*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> See for example the documentary *Wigstock: the Movie*, Barry Shils, Samuel Goldwin Company, 82 minutes, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> See Butler’s view on the difficulties posed by the articulation of racism, homophobia and misogyny in Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex.’* New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> See “Entretien avec Jean-Louis Houbedine et Guy Scarpetta” in Jacques Derrida. *Positions*. Paris: Minuit, 1972, 56-7. This proliferation also relies on the postcolonial strategies which resist oppressive models. This is all the more relevant as Gerestrant is from Haitian descent and uses French/Creole in her show.

<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that subversion is systematic or essential to drag king performances of course. The contrary effect is evoked by Halberstam and extensively discussed by Escuerdos-Alias’s book.

<sup>31</sup> A Lacanian definition provided by Butler: “The Real is that which resists and compels symbolization.” in Judith Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex.’* New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 70.