

We Are All Royalty: Narrative Comparison of a Drag Queen and King

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There is a rich history of drag performers in the U.S., and a fair amount of media and scholarly attention has been given to the queens and kings who lip sync, dance, and advocate from the stages of bars, nightclubs, grandstands, streets, and more. Drag performers do more than entertain—they are also active in social justice movements affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people (LGBTQ), and they have been since the Stonewall Riots in the late-1960s. Dozens of academic articles, stacks of popular press books, a few films, and a barrage of websites offer a variety of perspectives on drag. Yet, much of the spotlight these performers have received has understood them through heteronormative lenses and failed to appreciate the complex and complicated ways in which queens and kings relate to, live in, and shape the worlds around them. The project I discuss in this essay both speaks to and begins to mitigate the absence of truly reflective illustrations of the everyday lived experiences of drag performers. I begin by offering a brief history of this project and then describe the research methods used to carry out the inquiry.

First, a bit of history. Five years ago it would have been impossible for me to guess that I would go on to study drag queens and kings. In fact, five years ago I could not have told you what drag was. Yet, during the Fall 2009 semester while taking a Feminist Research Methods course I embarked on a small-scale study of how small-town drag queens engaged with the spaces they performed in—none of which were signified gay or lesbian spaces. After presenting a couple of themes from this study at the Women's Studies Student Research Symposium the following spring, a series of conversations with Professor Corey Johnson (Recreation and Leisure Studies Program) resulted in our collaboration on the present study, a narrative inquiry of the lives of serious and enduring drag performers around the U.S., which was funded through a Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities (CURO) Summer Research Fellowship. We are gay men, queer rights activists, and fierce fans of drag—our collaboration came naturally.

With help from a University librarian introduced in one of Dr. Johnson's courses, I performed an extensive review of the literature on drag. I turned to a variety of databases to conduct this research, including GenderWatch, LGBT Life, Communication and Mass Media Complete, and Sociological Abstracts, to name a few. Keywords like "drag queen," "drag king," "female/male impersonator," and "transgender" were helpful in locating appropriate essays. Books were obtained through GIL, GIL Universal, and through online sources like Google Books. Academic articles and books, popular books and articles, films, and websites were all included in this literature review. Particularly helpful to our inquiry were a number of theoretical essays published in *The Journal of Homosexuality* in 2002 and 2004 that sought to better explain drag and how it functions within and against queer communities in and out of the U.S. A variety of other articles, from a broad range of sociological, rhetorical, and leisure studies journals, plus numerous books about transgender, genderqueer, and gender more broadly, provided the foundation for our theoretical and conceptual understandings of drag as a cultural phenomenon. In sum, my transdisciplinary approach to researching drag led me to dozens of articles and books from as many different theoretical perspectives. Once this initial search was conducted, I cross-referenced sources from the existing collection, which yielded an additional set of secondary sources for the project. Our literature review continues to be shaped as new essays and books are published.

With these things in mind, I turned my attention to better understanding the nuances of carrying out a narrative inquiry, a form of qualitative research that asks participants to share their life stories. For both Dr. Johnson and myself, this was our first attempt at narrative research, so we relied heavily on Catherine Riessman's (2008) influential text on narrative methods to guide the methodological approach. Additionally, I searched for other qualitative studies that had engaged narrative methods in an effort to better understand and nuance our inquiry. This research led us to use semi-structured interviews as a way of positioning participants as experts of their own life stories.

The most important step in this project was interviewing the drag performers. Collectively, Dr. Johnson and I interviewed more than ten queens and kings from around the country. From Little Rock, Arkansas, to San Diego, California, to Asheville, NC, and beyond, our personal and professional travel itineraries led us to a variety of well-known performers. Our interviews illuminated the complex and complicated ways in which drag performers survive and thrive in their particular life contexts. However, the interviews were not always easy to attain; in some cases, interviewees dropped out at the last minute after weeks of planning. Other times, it was difficult just to start a conversation with a performer. To ease this particular barrier, we found it helpful to engage social media outlets as a way to garner participants. We "friended" performers on Facebook and discovered that they were accustomed to interacting in this way, which made it easier for us to find and secure participants. The interviews are at the center of our analysis and feature prominently in the written works that have emerged from this project. Because I have been interested, from the very beginning, in illuminating the performers' voices, conveying their stories has been one way to highlight their lived experiences.

As the social and political landscape for LGBTQ people shifts and evolves, so too does the peculiar place of drag performers. Such a fluctuating context has provided for interesting research—since Esther Newton first studied drag queens in the late-1960s to our present inquiry, some things have changed, some have stayed the same, and yet others remain to be seen. My research will continue to examine this changing landscape and to agitate for social change by bringing drag performers' voices to the forefront of gender, rhetorical, and leisure studies.

ABSTRACT

Drag performances have been studied time and time again as important visible cultural sites of gender transgression. Few studies, however, have sought to understand the ways in which drag performers—kings and queens—relate to and shape queer communities. In this manuscript we explore the narrative of a drag queen alongside a drag king in an effort to elucidate these relationships and the similarities and differences that become apparent between the two. Specifically, we are interested in how drag performers engage their drag personas for political and activist purposes as well as how the spaces they find themselves performing in influence their lived experiences. Seeking to understand drag performers through a genderqueer lens, which encourages engagement with the trans movement as a conduit for political expression, we employ narrative inquiry as a means by which to highlight and forefront the lived experiences of our participants.

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