

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 field work, but heard of several others. The relative scarcity of male impersonation presents important theoretical problems. — Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (1972)

7 DRAG KINGS

Masculinity and Performance

What Is a Drag King?

In clubs and cabarets, theaters and private parties, in movies and on TV, the drag queen has long occupied an important place in the American drama of gender instability. Drag queens have been the subject of mainstream and independent movies,¹ and straight audiences are, and historically have been, willing to pay good money to be entertained by men in drag. And not only in performance arenas have drag queens been an important part of social negotiations over the meaning of gender. In academia, ever since Esther Newton's 1972 classic anthropological study of female impersonators in America, scholars have been vigorously debating the relation of camp to drag, of drag to embodiment, and of camp humor to gay culture.² But in all the articles and studies and media exposés on drag queen culture, very little time and energy has been expended on the drag queen's counterpart, the drag king. As I have argued throughout this book, the history of public recognition of female masculinity is most frequently characterized by stunning absences. And the absence of almost all

curiosity about the possibilities and potentiality of drag king performance provides conclusive evidence of precisely such widespread indifference.

A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume. Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. Both the male impersonator and the drag king are different from the drag butch, a masculine woman who wears male attire as part of her quotidian gender expression. Furthermore, whereas the male impersonator and the drag king are not necessarily lesbian roles, the drag butch most definitely is.

In the 1990s, drag king culture has become something of a subcultural phenomenon. Queer clubs in most major American cities feature drag king acts: for example, there is a regular weekly drag king club in New York called Club Casanova whose motto is "the club where everyone is treated like a king!" There is a monthly club in London called Club Geezer and a quarterly club in San Francisco called Club Confidential. Club Confidential describes itself as "A swonderful, smarvelous, butch-femme, fag-dyke, boy-girl, retro-glam, lounge cabaret adventure" and encourages patrons to "dress to impress." This club supports lounge acts and offers lap dancing and strippers to entertain its drag clientele. In 1994 San Francisco held its first Drag King Contest, and in 1995 a Drag King calendar appeared with some of the contest's top drag kings. Mr. July, for example, is the ever dapper Stafford, co-organizer with Jordy Jones of Club Confidential; Stafford's calendar caption is a quote from Zippy the Pinhead that reads: "Gender confusion is a small price to pay for social progress." At Club Confidential and other San Francisco gender-bending nightspots such as Klubstitute, you can find drag kings and queens, contests and shows, and a crowd that gives the term "gender deviant" new meaning. At one contest, Klubstitute even featured a fake protest by fake feminists played by drag queens who disrupted the show by waving picket signs saying "Sisterhood, Not Misterhood," "Wigs Not Pigs," "Bitch Not Butch" and "Fems against Macho Butch Privilege."³ But although drag kings seem to have become a major part of urban queer scenes, there are no indications that drag king culture is nec-

essarily about to hit the mainstream any time soon. Nonetheless, at least one New York-based drag king, Murray Hill, has made it her goal to appear on the Rosie O'Donnell show.

I know at least three people who like to claim that *they*, and they alone, coined the name "drag king." But the truth is that as long as we have known the phrase "drag queen," the drag king has been a concept waiting to happen.⁴ Some scholars have traced the use of the word "drag" in relation to men in women's costume back to the 1850s, when the term was used for both stage actors playing female roles and young men who just liked to wear skirts.⁵ Male impersonation as a theatrical tradition extends back to the restoration stage, but more often than not, the trouser role was used to emphasize femininity rather than to mimic maleness. In "Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation," Laurence Senelick comments on the function of the breeches role as "a novelty" or as "a salacious turn" until the 1860s in America, when the male impersonator and the glamour drag artists brought to the stage "a plausible impression of sexes to which they did not belong."⁶ Much male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage involved a "boy" role in which a boyish woman represented an immature masculine subject; indeed, the plausible representation of mannishness by women was not encouraged. Because boys played women on the Shakespearean stage and women played boys on the nineteenth-century stage, some kind of role reversal symmetry seems to be in effect. But this role reversal actually masks the asymmetry of male and female impersonation. If boys can play girls and women, but women can play only boys, mature masculinity once again remains an authentic property of adult male bodies while all other gender roles are available for interpretation.

Male impersonation became an interesting phenomenon at the turn of the century in America with actors such as Annie Hindley developing huge female followings.⁷ On and off the stage, cross-dressing women in the early twentieth century, from Annie Hindley to Radclyffe Hall, began a steady assault on the naturalness of male masculinity and began to display in public the signs and symbols of an eroticized and often (but not inevitably) politicized female masculinity. That some male impersonators carried over their cross-dressing practices into their everyday lives suggests that their relation to masculinity extended far beyond theatricality. Furthermore, the cross-dressing actress represents only the tip of the iceberg in terms of an emergent community of masculine-identified women.

The theatrical tradition of male impersonation continued and flourished

for the first two decades of this century and then declined in popularity. After the passing of the 1933 Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code, which, as I discussed in my last chapter, banned all performances of so-called sexual perversion, male impersonation died out as a mainstream theatrical practice.⁸ Some critics have traced the careers of one or two male impersonators such as Storme DeLaverie to show that pockets of male impersonation still existed within subcultural gay male drag culture between the 1930s and the 1960s. However, there is general agreement that no extensive drag king culture developed within lesbian bar culture to fill the void left by the disappearance of male impersonators from the mainstream theater. Indeed, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis comment in their Buffalo oral histories that the masculinity constructed by butches in the 1940s and 1950s was accompanied by a "puzzling lack of camp."⁹ Kennedy and Davis observe a notable lack of anything like drag king culture in the butch-femme bar world: "Few butches performed as male impersonators, and no cultural aesthetic seems to have developed around male impersonation" (75). Kennedy and Davis use the absence of a camp or drag aesthetic to caution against the conflation of gay and lesbian histories. The queen and the butch, they argue, do not share parallel histories. Like many other cultural commentators, Kennedy and Davis tend to attribute the lack of lesbian drag to the asymmetries of masculine and feminine performativity in a male supremacist society. Accordingly, because the business of survival as a butch woman is often predicated on one's ability to pass as male in certain situations, camp has been a luxury that the passing butch cannot afford.

While it seems very likely that the lack of a lesbian drag tradition has much to do with the need for butches to pass, at least one other reason that male impersonation did not achieve any general currency within lesbian bar culture must also be attributed to mainstream definitions of male masculinity as nonperformative. Indeed, current representations of masculinity in white men unfailingly depend on a relatively stable notion of the realness and the naturalness of both the male body and its signifying effects. Advertisements for Dockers pants and Jockey underwear, for example, appeal constantly to the no-nonsense aspect of masculinity, to the idea that masculinity "just is," whereas femininity reeks of the artificial. Indeed, there are very few places in American culture where male masculinity reveals itself to be staged or performative; when it does, however, the masculine masquerade appears quite fragile. In TV sitcoms such as

Seinfeld, for example, men apply comic pressure to the assumed naturalness of maleness, and a truly messy, fragile, and delegitimized masculinity emerges. In one particularly memorable *Seinfeld* episode highlighting abject male inadequacy, for example, George confesses to Jerry: "I always feel like lesbians look at me and say, 'That's the reason I am not into men!'" Such Woody Allenesque proclamations expose momentarily the instability of mainstream fictions of fortified male masculinities.

Outside of *Seinfeld*, unfortunately, white men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the nonperformative nature of masculinity. For one thing, if masculinity adheres "naturally" and inevitably to men, then masculinity cannot be impersonated. For another, if the nonperformance is part of what defines white male masculinity, then all performed masculinities stand out as suspect and open to interrogation. For example, gay male macho clones quite clearly exaggerate masculinity, and in them, masculinity tips into feminine performance. And the bad black gangsta rapper who bombastically proclaims his masculinity becomes a convenient symbol of male misogyny that at least temporarily exonerates less obviously misogynistic white male rock performances.¹⁰ These clear differences between majority and minority masculinities make the drag king act different for different women. For the white drag king performing conventional heterosexual maleness, masculinity has first to be made visible and theatrical before it can be performed. Masculinities of color and gay masculinities, however, have already been rendered visible and theatrical in their various relations to dominant white masculinities, and the performance of these masculinities presents a somewhat easier theatrical task. Furthermore, although white masculinity seems to be readily available for parody by the drag kings, black masculinities or queer masculinities are often performed by drag kings in the spirit of homage or tribute rather than humor.

We call one of the most conventional forms of male neurosis "performance anxiety," and this term tells us everything about the strained relationship between heterosexual masculinity and performativity. Performance anxiety, of course, describes a particularly male, indeed heterosexual, fear of some version of impotence in the face of a demand for sexual interaction. In comic representations, performance anxiety is often depicted as "thinking about it too much" or "thinking instead of doing." Clearly, in such scenarios, the performance anxiety emerges when masculinity is marked as performative rather than natural, as if performativity and potency are mutually exclusive or at least psychically incompatible.

The anxiety that performance anxiety acts out, then, is not, as one might think, an anxiety about doing; it is a neurotic fear of exposing the theatricality of masculinity.¹¹

"Drag" and "performance" have recently become key words within contemporary gender theory, and they are generally used to describe the theatricality of *all* gender identity. "Drag," as Esther Newton suggests, describes discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality but refuses to allow this discontinuity to represent dysfunction. In a drag performance, rather, incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity. Newton also defines "camp" in relation to gay male practices and gay male humor. "Performance," of course, emerges out of Judith Butler's influential theory of gender trouble, in which she suggests that drag parodies "the notion of an original or primary gender identity" and that "the action of gender requires a performance which is repeated."¹² Butler also proposes that parodies of the notion of "true gender identities" emerge within "drag," "cross-dressing," and "butch/femme identities" (137). Butler's analysis, then, takes drag to be a gay male cultural practice and offers butch-femme as the lesbian equivalent. Because drag culture in both Butler's and Newton's analyses of gender theatricality is primarily related to gay male culture, and because it has a much more complicated relation to queer dyke cultural practices, do the very different histories of male and female impersonation produce very different notions of gender performance for male and female embodiment? If we recognize that drag has not traditionally been a part of lesbian bar culture and, furthermore, that masculinity tends to define itself as nonperformative, what are the implications for a general theory of the social production of gender? Is butch-femme really the equivalent gender parody to gay male drag? What is the impact of an emergent drag king culture on theories of gender performance?

In *Mother Camp*, Newton is quite clear on the point that gay men have "a much more elaborate subculture" than lesbians do, and she admits that the relative scarcity of male impersonators "presents important theoretical problems" (5). In a very recent essay, "Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen," Newton returns to the scene of these "important theoretical problems" and ponders anew the problems of drag and camp in relation to a so-called butch-femme aesthetic. In "Dick(less) Tracy," Newton interrogates a renewed interest on the part of lesbian cultural critics into the practices and meanings of lesbian camp and lesbian drag, but like Kennedy and Davis, Newton cautions against easy "conflations of butch with

drag (queen) and butch-femme with camp."¹³ Newton is concerned that a queer formulation of camp based on contemporary butch-femme styles ignores the historical fact of a lack of camp cultures within the dyke bar culture of the fifties and sixties. "My own experience of butch-femme bar culture in the late fifties and sixties," writes Newton, "told me that butch-femme was not . . . ironic, not a camp, and certainly not, as Judith Butler had suggested, a parody, at least not then."¹⁴ Newton, finally, calls for more attention to ethnographic and historical materials within the production of queer theories of gender and reminds us that "drag and camp are embedded in histories and power relations including when they are deployed in the theatrical venues so beloved in Cherry Grove, in the lesbian theatrical and film productions studied by performance theorists, or on the pages of academic journals" ("Dick(less) Tracy," 166). The drag performance that Newton goes on to analyze in this article is by a butch lesbian who dresses up as a drag queen and wins a drag contest in Cherry Grove. The appearance of a lesbian in a drag queen contest allows Newton to theorize the ways in which lesbians may deploy drag and camp "not to destabilize gender categories as such, but rather to destabilize male monopolies and to symbolize and constitute the power of the lesbian minority" (165-66).

For Newton, then, lesbian camp is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is aimed at, and performed through, gay male monopolies. She resists the reading of camp back through a history of butch-femme. Lesbian scholars have vigorously debated the meanings of camp in relation to lesbian culture and while some theorize camp as readily available for lesbian appropriation,¹⁵ others argue that it remains antithetical to lesbian representation.¹⁶ In some accounts, camp becomes an essentially gay male aesthetic, in others it is lesbian, and more generally camp has been claimed as simply "queer." Newton specifies that she finds the conflation of butch-femme with drag and camp to be inherently problematic. Although I do not think that camp is unavailable to lesbian performers, I do think that because camp is predicated on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender, it tends to be the genre for an outrageous performance of femininity (by men or women) rather than outrageous performances of masculinity. Notice that when Newton extends her analysis of camp to a lesbian scene, she reads the performance of a butch performing as a drag queen, performing femininity, in other words. I think, therefore, that we can modify claims that camp cannot serve lesbians' theatrical endeavors and that it is always about male sexuality; perhaps it is more accurate

to say that only lesbian performances of femininity can be inflected with camp because camp is always about femininity.

Performances of masculinity seem to demand a different genre of humor and performance. It is difficult to make masculinity the target of camp precisely because, as we have noted, masculinity tends to manifest as non-performative. When drag king performances are campy, it is generally because the actor allows her femininity to inform and inflect the masculinity she performs. 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, not because this is a word used by drag kings themselves but because I think that a new term is the only way to avoid always collapsing lesbian history and social practice associated with drag into gay male histories and practices. Accordingly, femme may well be a location for camp, but butch is not. For drag butches and drag kings who perform masculinity from a butch or masculine subject position, camp is not necessarily the dominant aesthetic. Some drag king performances, of course, may well contain a camp element, but the kinging effect, as I elaborate later, depends on several different strategies to render masculinity visible and theatrical.

The difference between men performing femininity and women performing masculinity is a crucial difference to mark out: the stakes in each are different, the performances look different, and there is a distinct difference between the relations between masculinity and performance and femininity and performance. To give one example of what I am saying about the difference between camp and kinging, I think it helps to examine an actual drag show. In a performance I saw at Club Casanova, the weekly drag king club in New York, in December 1996, the show combined both drag kings and drag queens onstage. The effect was startling. The four impersonators were performing as the B52's, and the two men in the band were played by drag kings Pencil Kase and Evil Cave Boy. The two women, with bouffant hairdos and five-inch heels, were played by drag queens: Miss Kitten played Kate, and Corvette played Cindy. While the drag queens bounced and bobbed, stumbled and slipped around the small stage, they almost blocked out the more understated drag kings. Evil Cave Boy as the lead singer, Fred, jumped up and down, but his performance was marked by restraint and containment; Pencil Kase similarly played down his role as Keith and sulked in the back with his air bass guitar.

The queens towered over the kings and barely restrained their impulses to take over the entire stage. The effect of placing drag femininity and drag masculinity side by side was positively vertiginous; on the one hand, the juxtaposition made clear the difference between a camp femininity and a very downplayed masculinity (an almost antitheatrical performance), and on the other hand, it made all gender unreadable. The kings were very convincing as men, and this made the drag queens more plausible despite the height differentials. A rather trendy bald person with shades and many visible piercings was standing next to me during the show, and after five minutes, this person called out: "I don't get it! Who are the men and who are the women?" It is a frequent event at Club Casanova for drag queens to take the stage with the drag kings, and their performances literally spill over into the drag king's careful and hilariously restrained acts, which are noticeably sincere, or, to use a Wildean term that tends to typify the very opposite of camp, "earnest." This is one part of what I call kinging: where all the emphasis is on a reluctant and withholding kind of performance.

While the spectacle of feminine and masculine drag onstage simultaneously allows for an interesting clash of gender-bending styles, the solo appearance of the drag king allows for an unusual confrontation between male and female masculinity and provides a rare opportunity for the wholesale parody of, particularly, white masculinity. The drag king performance, indeed, exposes the structure of dominant masculinity by making it theatrical and by rehearsing the repertoire of roles and types on which such masculinity depends. In the rest of this chapter, I outline the ways in which dominant forms of male masculinity manage to appear authentic and all other forms of masculinity are consequently labeled derivative. This relation is actually not reproduced within dominant femininities: as a film such as *Paris Is Burning* proved, much of what we understand to be original about female femininity already has been channeled through queer male bodies. The startling image of drag queen Willie Ninja teaching female models how to walk the catwalk in *Paris Is Burning* perhaps provides the best example of the lack of originality that we associate with female femininities. Another example of this would be recent films about young women such as *Clueless* (1995) and *Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion* (1997). In both films, the spectacle of exaggerated femininity creates a kind of heterosexual camp humor that depends totally on a prior construction of femininity by drag queens. This is particularly true in *Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion*, in which Lisa Kudrow and Mira

Sorvino, as the two women preparing for their reunion, present a spectacle of loud and outrageous femininity that is only made more camp and more evocative of a drag queen aesthetic because they are both very tall and tower over their classmates. Finally, the British TV show *Absolutely Fabulous* completely appropriates camp and drag queen motifs to portray the humorous lives of two middle-aged women in the design business. In all of these representations, humorous femininity is relayed through a gay male aesthetic. By way of comparison, it would be almost impossible to imagine a mainstream depiction of masculinity that acknowledged that it had been routed through lesbian masculinity.

The notion of female femininity as derivative, furthermore, echoes the wholesale depiction of lesbianism as epitomizing the derivative or unauthentic. According to such logic, butch lesbians are supposedly imitating men; femme lesbians are wanna-be drag queens, or else they are accused of blending seamlessly into heterosexual femininity; the androgynous lesbian has "borrowed" from both male and female; and the leather dyke or club girl parasitically draws from gay male leather culture. Drag king performances, however, provide some lesbian performers (although all drag kings are by no means lesbians) with the rare opportunity to expose the artificiality of all genders and all sexual orientations and therefore to answer the charge of inauthenticity that is usually made only about lesbian identity.

In one of the very few articles on the topic of contemporary drag kings, the notion of lesbian inauthenticity directs the author's line of inquiry. In "Dragon Ladies, Draggin' Men," an excellent introduction to the topic of lesbians and drag, Sarah Murray asks the question that lies behind most analyses of drag king culture, namely: "Why hasn't drag developed into a distinct theatrical genre among lesbians in the United States?"¹⁷ She answers her own question by drawing on conventional notions of lesbian invisibility and by remarking on the "naturalization of the masculine." Murray states correctly, "a woman has less to grab on to when doing individual drag" (356). Obviously, my argument about the apparent stability of male masculinity concurs with Murray's analysis. I also agree with Murray that the forms of masculinity that are available for performance tend to be either working-class masculinities (the construction worker, for example), nonwhite masculinities, or explicitly performative middle-class masculinities such as the lounge lizard. However, where we diverge is on the topic of lesbian masculinities themselves. Murray, like some other cultural com-

mentators on butch-femme, finds butch iconicity to be less about defining female masculinity and more about women appropriating male power. She reduces butchness to a historical marker of lesbian visibility that belongs to 1950s lesbian communities but not to contemporary queer dyke culture, and she suggests that lesbians, ultimately, "don't feel free to play with the masculine the way gay men play with the feminine" (360).

I would respond to these arguments by saying that it is crucial to recognize that masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and does not properly express male heterosexuality. A popular misunderstanding of lesbian butchness depicts it as either an appropriation of dominant male masculinity or an instance of false consciousness in which the butch simply lacks strong models of lesbian identity. I am trying to show in this chapter (and in this book in general) that what we call "masculinity" has also been produced by masculine women, gender deviants, and often lesbians. For this reason, it is inaccurate and indeed regressive to make masculinity into a general term for behavior associated with males. To argue, as Murray does, that women do not feel free to play with masculinity is to position masculinity as something separate from all lesbian women, something that they might play with or imitate, but not a quality that they may express or embody. Furthermore, butch identity has a historically complicated relation to notions of lesbian community, lesbian identity, and lesbian visibility, and, particularly, to lesbian drag. Because so little has been written about female masculinity that does not reduce it to a stereotype of the lesbian or a pathetic parody of maleness, we have yet to determine what its various relations might be to either lesbian, transgender, or masculine identification. In this book, I have argued that at times butchness is the privileged sign of lesbian identity, but at other moments, butchness represents the sign of gender inversion, which was rejected to craft a properly female and women-identified notion of lesbian identity. In recent years, furthermore, transgenderism (as I show in chapter 5) has altered the conditions for butch identification. In her article, Murray avoids any substantive discussion of transgenderism because it is really not part of her project to account for what happens when the drag is not a costume but part of an identity effect.¹⁸ Butches, and transgender butches in particular, I propose by way of clarification, do not necessarily wear male clothing as drag; they embody masculinity.

Drag queens, it is often said, constantly walk a thin line between revering women and femininity and expressing pernicious misogyny; but what

similar boundaries do drag kings traverse? Do drag kings softly tiptoe between admiring men and hating men? If so, what are the consequences? Is male impersonation more likely to be annexed to gender transgression than female impersonation? If so, what kind of transgression, what kind of gender? Following Carole-Anne Tyler's injunction to "read each instance of drag . . . symptomatically"¹⁹ as opposed to simply asserting that each is either radical or conservative, I intend in what follows to break down drag king theater into its multiple performances and meanings, to distinguish between drag king shows and drag king contests, and to produce a taxonomy of drag king types in order to sort through the styles and performances of different women in drag.

To Be Real: Drag King Culture, 1996

I want to proceed here from Esther Newton's suggestion that we contextualize theories of performance and queer theory in general with "ethnographically grounded social theory."²⁰ Newton warns against concentrating on "representational strategies" without "knowing the history of lesbian/gay male relations in the community and beyond." She queries: "How can intellectuals skip over this ethnographic step to broad abstractions and generalities without being guilty of a misleading (and reprehensible) imperialism ('Who cares what you think your representations mean, they mean what we say they do'). There is a balance to be struck between accepting the 'natives'' accounts at face value with no analysis, and discounting them completely as 'fictions' or useful only to an already determined theoretical agenda" (171). In my own research for this chapter, I have conducted interviews, talked to people in the clubs, visited many different clubs, and tried to ascertain the history and progress of each drag king space.

While I believe that this methodology is absolutely crucial to the project of charting the emergence of a nineties dyke drag king culture, I also think that interviews can be a frustrating obstacle to knowledge as much as they can produce important ethnographic information. I have no desire to force drag king representations into "an already determined theoretical agenda," but I have also become aware through the interview process that many performers are not necessarily that interested in the theoretical import of their acts or even in identifying a larger context. Many of the drag kings gave superficial answers to questions such as "Why do you like to



Figure 30. "Judith 'Jack' Halberstam," by Del Grace (1997). Photo courtesy of the artist.

dress up in drag?" They might answer, "Just for fun," or, "It seemed like a crazy thing to do," or, "I didn't really think about it." Obviously, such answers do not really convey any interesting or useful information about drag and its motivations, nor do they get to the "truth" of the drag king scene. Other methodological problems involved a level of what I can only describe as "butch-phobia" among the New York drag kings whom I interviewed. Even drag kings who wore drag on- and offstage and who had very boyish or mannish appearances would not identify as butch. The scarcity of drag kings willing to identify as butch, as Newton might say, "presents important theoretical problems." On account of the difficulties associated with the interview process, I have blended information I have obtained from the drag kings with my own observations and theoretical framings. Moreover, I do not consider myself to be completely outside the drag king culture I am depicting here. Although I have never performed as a drag king, I always attend the club in what is received as "drag" (suit and tie, for example), even though I do not wear male clothing as drag. I have been photographed and interviewed at the clubs as a drag king despite my nonappearance onstage. This blending of onstage drag and offstage masculinity suggests that the line between male drag and female masculinity in a drag king club is permeable and permanently blurred.

There are two main arenas of drag that I focus on here: first, a series of drag king contests that took place over the course of a year at Hershe Bar, and second, the regular drag king shows that take place weekly at Club Casanova. The drag king contests in New York paid cash prizes and often attracted nonwhite and non-middle-class audiences and participants. They were marked by a notable lack of theatricality and camp and depended utterly on notions of masculine authenticity rather than impersonations of maleness. As we shall see, the Hershe Bar contests and the Club Casanova shows produce very different forms of drag king culture, although there are multiple sites of intersection and overlap between the kings who participated in the contests and the kings who perform in the clubs.

The 1995–1996 Hershe Bar Drag King Contests

On the night I attended my first drag king contest, I was asked on my way into the club whether I would like to compete. I thought long and hard about this question but said finally, "No thanks, I don't have an act." As it

turned out, neither did any of the other drag kings, but this did not stop them from going onstage. I took my place in the audience and waited for the show. The club, Hershe Bar, was packed with a very diverse crowd, and the show was the center of the evening's entertainment. Finally the lights dimmed, and the evening's emcee, lesbian comic Julie Wheeler, took the stage in her own Tony Las Vegas drag and began the evening by performing an Elvis song. Soon afterward, ten drag kings filed out in various states of dress and flaunted many different brands of masculine display. Like champion bodybuilders, the drag kings flexed and posed to the now wildly cheering audience: the winner was to receive prize money of \$200, and she earned the right to compete in the grand finale for a prize of \$1,000. The show was a huge success in terms of producing a spectacle of alternative masculinities; however, it was ultimately a big letdown in terms of the performative. The drag kings, generally speaking, seemed to have no idea of how to perform as drag kings, and when called on to "do something," one after the other just muttered his name. When compared to the absolutely exaggerated performances featured within drag queen shows, these odd moments of drag king stage fright read as part of a puzzle around masculine performativity. While certainly part of the drag king stage fright had to do with the total lack of any prior role models for drag king performance, and while certainly this inertia has been replaced in recent months by lavish drag king acts, at least in these early contests, the stage fright was also a sign of the problem of masculine nonperformativity. The drag kings had not yet learned how to turn masculinity into theater. There were other contributing factors at work, though, including that many of the women onstage seemed to be flaunting their own masculinity rather than some theatrical imitation of maleness.

The drag king contest is a difficult scene to read because we need a taxonomy of female masculinities to distinguish carefully between the various types of identification and gender acts on display. I would like, therefore, to spend some time charting some of the masculine gender variations within the drag king contests. My models are quite particular to the contests and have not necessarily carried over into the regular performances. Drag king contests, it is worth noting, function less like traditional drag queen shows and have more in common with the various performances staged by the queens in *Paris Is Burning*. Like the Harlem balls documented in this film, these drag king contests had a cash prize and drew a

largely black and Latino pool of contestants. Unlike the ball scene, the drag king events do not necessarily open out into an elaborate culture of gay houses and sex work.²¹

There are many different genres of masculine performance on display in the drag king contest, so many, in fact, that the performances tend to be incommensurable and therefore difficult to judge. For the reader to understand the kinds of performances I am describing here, this section includes photographic images of various drag kings, most of which were taken by New York-based artist Betsey Gallagher (aka drag king Murray Hill). Gallagher began an art project on drag king culture in the spring of 1996 as a development of an earlier project on drag queens. It soon became apparent to her that the drag kings she was photographing had a very different set of visual codes and gender systems than the drag queens. To capture something of the particularity of the drag king contest, Gallagher took posed, rather than action, shots of her drag king models. This creates a quiet, almost deadpan effect and emphasizes the continuities between being and performing for these drag kings. With the aid of these images, I want to outline at least five different forms of masculine performance at work in the drag king contest.

Butch Realness

In the drag king contests, the winner would very often be a biological female who was convincing in her masculinity (sometimes convincing meant she could easily pass as male, but sometimes it meant her display of a recognizable form of female masculinity). It is not so easy to find photographic images for this category because many of the "butch realness" participants did not necessarily identify as drag kings and thus did not want to be photographed for a drag king project. To describe the "convincing" aspect of the butch realness look, then, I offer the example of the contestant who won on the first night I attended Hershe Bar. The butch who won was a very muscular black woman wearing a basketball shirt and shorts. In her "sports drag" and with her display of flexed muscles, the contestant could easily have passed as male, and this made her "convincing." This contestant won through her display of an authentic or unadorned and unperformed masculinity; she was probably a walk-on rather than someone who prepared elaborately for the contest. Interestingly enough, the category of butch realness is often occupied by nonwhite drag kings, attesting specifically to the way that masculinity becomes visible as masculinity once

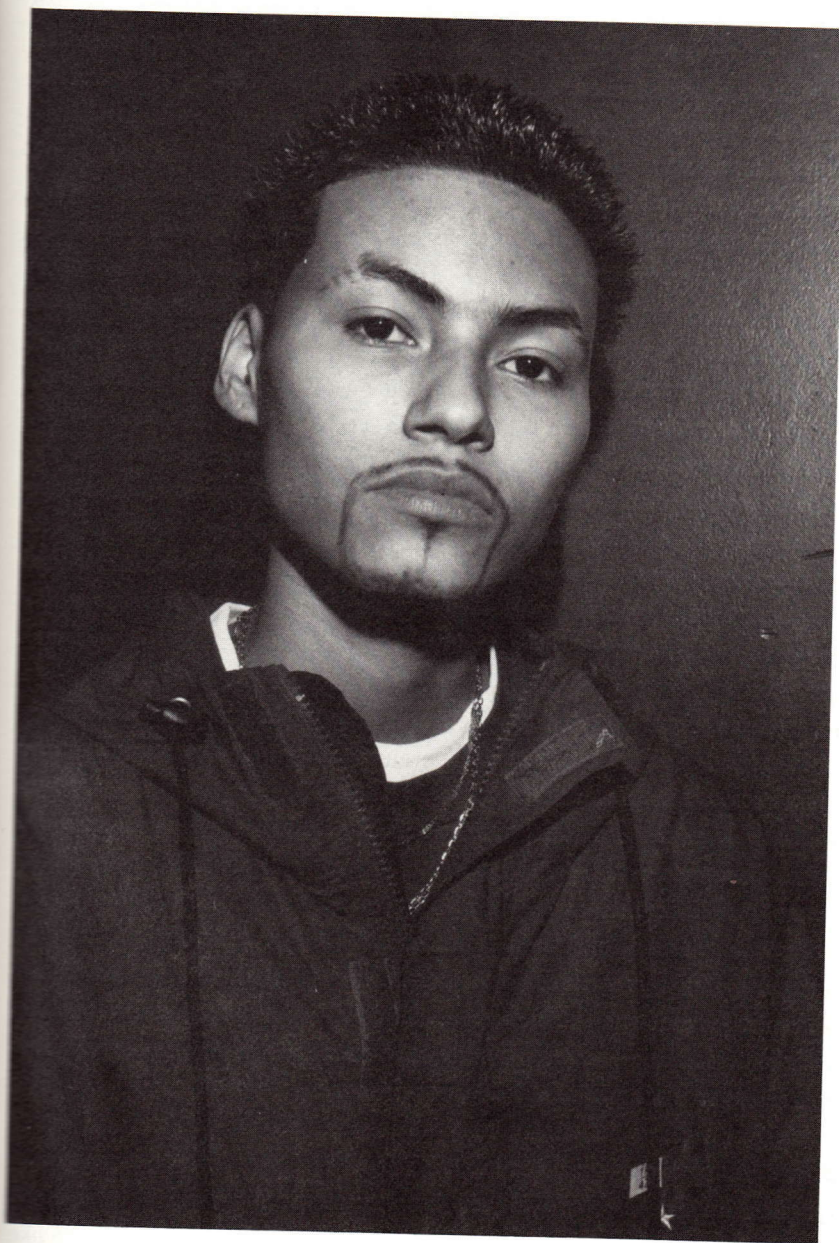


Figure 31. Butch Realness. "Sean," by Betsey Gallagher (1995). Photo courtesy of the artist.

it leaves the sphere of normative white maleness. Furthermore, 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. The white drag kings in this particular contest were at something of a loss: they were not at all performative in the way some of the black and latino drag kings were (dancing and rapping) and tended to wear tuxedos as part of their drag king look. Every now and then, a white drag king would attempt a construction worker aesthetic or strike a James Dean pose.

Figure 31 shows another version of butch realness. This young Asian American drag king was utterly convincing in her masculinity, so much so that women were challenging whether she was “really a woman.” This drag king had no performance and relied on some version of authenticity to win her competition: in this shot, we see her with a small fake mustache and beard, but in subsequent contests, she appeared with no facial hair and generated the same response. Because of its reliance on notions of authenticity and the real, the category of butch realness is situated on the sometimes vague boundary between transgender and butch definition. The realness of the butch masculinity can easily tip, in other words, into the desire for a more sustained realness in a recognizably male body. There is no clear way of knowing how many of the drag kings at this club had any transgender modes of identification, and because the whole show took place under the auspices of a lesbian club, one might assume that most identified at least in some way with the label of dyke or lesbian.

One way of describing the relationship between butch realness and male masculinity is in terms of what José Muñoz has called an active disidentification, or “a mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it.”²² Similarly, within butch realness, masculinity is neither assimilated into maleness nor opposed to it; rather it involves an active disidentification with dominant forms of masculinity, which are subsequently recycled into alternative masculinities.

Femme Pretender

Butch realness is clearly opposed to femme drag king performances. These may be termed “femme pretender” performances, and they look more like drag queen shows, not simply because the disjuncture between biological sex and gender is the basis for the gender act but because irony and camp flavor the performance. In figure 32, Gallagher captures the elements of the



Figure 32. Femme Pretender.
"Chico Soda," by Betsey
Gallagher (1996). Photo
courtesy of the artist.

femme pretender look as cultivated by Chico Soda, a New York performer who uses the drag king stage as part of her act. You can see from the photograph that the "disguise" of heavy eyebrows and a goatee are deliberately overdone, and Chico Soda's pose is deliberately, loudly theatrical and even parodic rather than quietly naturalistic like the previous shots. Another femme pretender who has garnered much attention in New York is Buster Hymen. Hymen has a song-and-dance act and often disrobes halfway through and transforms herself into a lounge kitten. Clearly, the performance is all about transformation, and it capitalizes on the idea that, as Newton puts it, "the appearance is an illusion."²³ Whereas a few male drag performers create drag drama by pulling off their wigs or dropping their voices a register or two, the femme pretender often blows her cover by exposing her breasts or ripping off her suit in a parody of classic striptease.

One or two femme pretenders would appear in every drag king contest, and their performances often revolved around a consolidation of

femininity rather than a disruption of dominant masculinity. The femme pretender actually dresses up butch or male only to show how thoroughly her femininity saturates her performance—she performs the failure of her own masculinity as a convincing spectacle. These performances tend to be far more performative than butch realness ones, but possibly less interesting for the following reasons: first, the femme drag king has not really altered the structure of drag as it emerged within gay male contexts as camp; second, the femme pretender offers a reassurance that female masculinity is just an act and will not carry over into everyday life. Many femme drag kings talk about the power they enjoy in accessing masculinity through a drag act, but they return ultimately to how confirmed they feel in their femininity. Ultimately, femme drag kings tend to use drag as a way to, as Buster Hymen puts it, “walk both sides of the gender fence,”²⁴ and this tends to reassert a stable binary definition of gender. It is worth noting that the drag kings who have managed to garner the most publicity tend to be the femme pretenders.²⁵ Even some gay male writers who are conversant with the gender-bending tactics of drag tend to identify all drag kings as femme drag king. Michael Musto, in an article on drag kings for the *New York Post*, concluded his piece with a reassurance for his straight readers: he notes that very butch looking drag king Mo B. Dick “happens to love lipstick as much as any girl.”²⁶

Male Mimicry

In male mimicry, the drag king takes on a clearly identifiable form of male masculinity and attempts to reproduce it, sometimes with an ironic twist and sometimes without. In one of the few performances of white masculinity at the Hershe Bar shows, for example, a drag king contestant performed a mock priest act that had the nice effect of exposing the theatricality of religion. Male mimicry is often at work in the femme pretender performances but actually can be performed by butches or femmes. It is the concept of male mimicry that props up an enterprise such as Diane Torr’s Drag King Workshop. Although the workshop takes us a little off the topic of the drag king contests, the concept of male mimicry as produced by the workshops did influence some of the white contestants in the Hershe Bar contests. Indeed, many news articles attribute the origins of New York drag king culture to Diane Torr (as does Torr herself), and some drag kings such as Buster Hymen credit Torr with inspiring them to begin performing.²⁷ Diane Torr is a New York-based performance artist



Figure 33. Male Mimicry.
 "Diane Torr," by Betsey
 Gallagher (1996). Photo
 courtesy of the artist.

who, as Danny Drag King, runs a workshop in which women can become men for a day.²⁸ Torr's workshop advertisement tells potential participants that they can "explore another identity—you will learn the basic male behavioral patterns. How to walk, sit, talk and lie down like a man."²⁹ In the workshop, which has been written up in many different magazines and newspapers and filmed for the BBC, Torr instructs her students in the manly arts of taking up space, dominating conversations, nose picking, and penis wearing, and she gives them general rudeness skills. Torr's students become men for the day by binding and jockey stuffing, and then she shows them how to apply facial hair and create a credible male look. Finally, Torr takes her charges out into the mean streets of New York City and shows them how to pass. Torr herself articulates no particular masculine aspirations; she, like many of her workshop participants, avows over and over that she has no desire to *be* a man; she just wants to pass as a man within this limited space of experimentation.³⁰ Torr says that her reasons

for cross-dressing are quite clear; she wants to experience "male authority and territory and entitlement."³¹ Many workshop women discuss the feeling of power and privilege to which the masquerade gives them access, and many are titillated by the whole thing but relieved at the end of the day to return to a familiar femininity.

One account of the drag king workshop describes it as a spin on the everyday practice of gender performance. Shannon Bell claims to be what we might call "a gender queen," someone who plays butch one day and femme the next.³² She used the Drag King Workshop to explore one of her many genders, her queer fag self. Obviously, this sense of gender as costume and voluntary performance is not at all related to the butch realness mode of female masculinity. Bell plays gender like a game precisely because her gender normativity provides a stable base for playing with alterity. Bell represents the typical workshop participant in that she understands its function as an exercise in gender fluidity and a political exposé of male privilege. Bell asks Torr why people take the workshop, and Torr provides a political justification intended to make the workshop respectable within the terms of feminist consciousness: "Part of what happens at the Drag King Workshop is that women learn certain things: we don't have to smile, we don't have to concede ground, we don't have to give away territory" (96). In this way, the workshop functions rather like a feminist consciousness-raising group but seems to have very little to do with the reconstruction of masculinity.

Diane Torr goes so far as to claim that she invented the term "drag king," and she tells interviewer Amy Linn: "It came to me in about 1989. . . . It was a day that I had done a photo shoot in male clothes, and I had an opening to go to at the Whitney. I decided to go dressed as a man."³³ When Torr found herself easily passing and receiving much attention from women, she decided to make this defamiliarizing experience available to women in the form of a workshop for assertiveness training. The workshop, obviously, has little to do with drag kings or kinging. It is a simple lesson in how the other half lives, and it usefully opens a window on male privilege for women who suffer the effects of such privilege every day. As I suggested earlier, however, it is hard to lay claim to the term "drag king," and certainly we would not want to attribute the origins of modern drag king culture to a workshop that is primarily designed for heterosexual women and unproblematically associates masculinity with maleness. For masculine women who walk around being mistaken for men every day,

the workshop has no allure. The Drag King Workshop emphasizes for me the divide between a fascination in male masculinity and its prerogatives and an interest in the production of alternate masculinities.

Fag Drag

Like other forms of minority masculinity, gay male masculinity stands apart from mainstream formulations of maleness and is very available for drag king imitation. Furthermore, some lesbians in recent years have positively fetishized gay male sex culture, and some women base their masculinity and their sex play on gay male models. This may mean copying a gay male aesthetic such as the "Castro clone." The Castro clone refers to a popular masculine aesthetic within urban gay ghettos that depends on leather and denim and a queer biker look. That the image is already identified as a clone suggests that imitation and impersonation are already part of its construction; this makes it easy for drag kings to take on fag drag. Some of the drag kings in the Hershe Bar contest cultivated a gay male look with leather or handlebar mustaches, and they often routed these looks through a Village People type of performance of hypermasculinity.

Denaturalized Masculinity

Last in my taxonomy of female masculinities, I want to identify a category that often disappears into the other categories I have outlined. Denaturalized masculinity 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. In figure 34, we see Dred, who won the 1996 Hershe Bar contest, pulling off a tribute to blaxploitation macho with a butch twist. Dred is an interesting drag king because she plays the line between the many different versions of drag king theater. On the one hand, she appears in the bar contests heavily made up as Superfly; on the other hand, she also plays in staged drag king theatrical performances in a much more campy role in which she metamorphs from Superfly to Foxy Brown. Then again, she regularly performs with another drag king, Shon, as part of rap duo Run DMC. Dred represents the fluid boundaries between the many different drag king performances. I include her in my section on denaturalized masculinity because she combines appropriation, critique, and alternative masculinity in her presentation.

Denaturalized masculinity in many ways produces the most successful

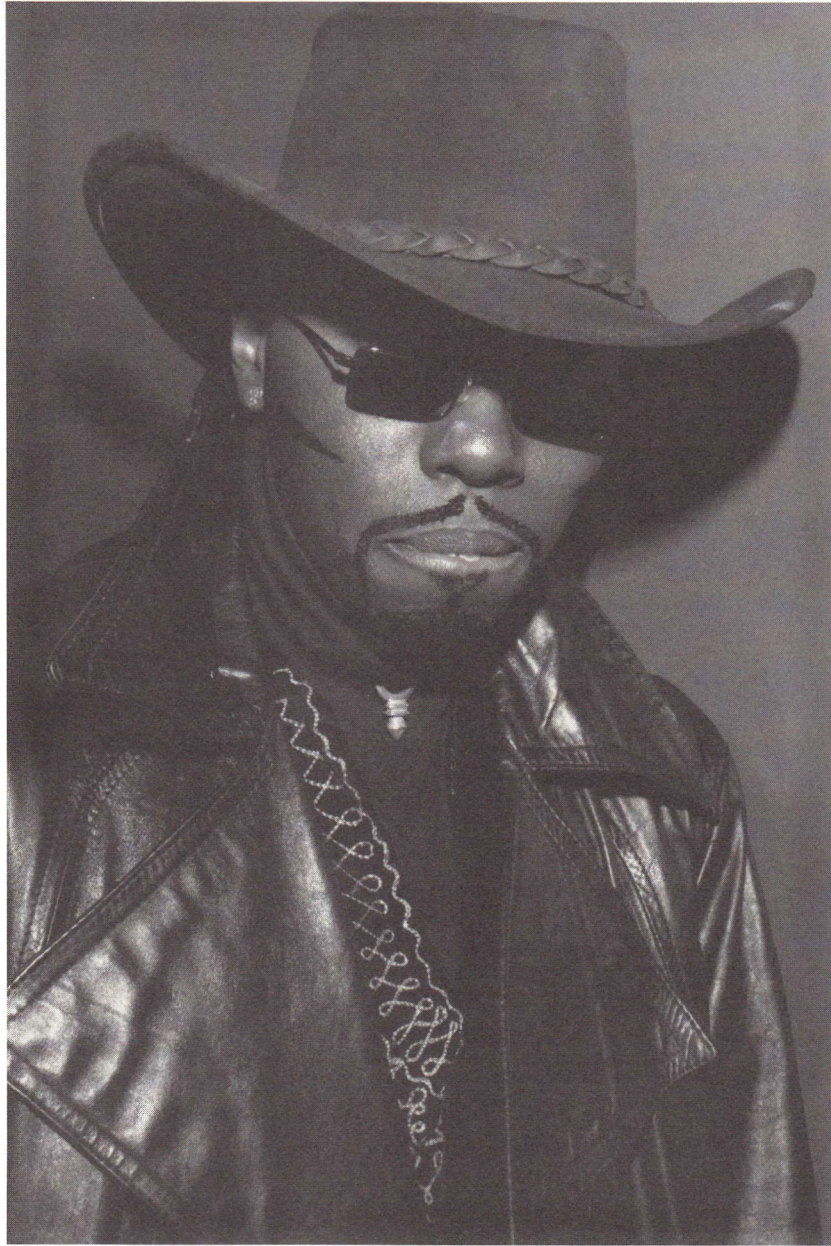


Figure 34. Denaturalized Masculinity. "Dred," by Betsey Gallagher (1996). Photo courtesy of the artist.

drag king performances. In Julie Wheeler's act as Tony Las Vegas, the emcee for the drag king contest, for example, she wore slicked-back hair and a lounge suit. Tony made sleazy asides throughout the contest, and in the show I was at, he moved in way too close on a drag king who was clearly a femme pretender, breathing in her ear and asking what she had on under her suit. He periodically called out to the audience, "Show us yer tits," and generally made a spectacle of slimy masculinity and misogyny. Whereas the Drag King Workshop mimics maleness without necessarily parodying it, Tony makes male parody the center of his act by finding the exact mode in which male masculinity most often appears as performance: sexism and misogyny. The drag king demonstrates through her own masculinity and through the theatricalization of masculinity that there are no essential links between misogyny and masculinity: rather, masculinity seems bound to misogyny structurally in the context of patriarchy and male privilege. For masculine women who cannot access male privilege, the rewards of misogyny are few and far between, and so she is very likely to perform her masculinity without misogyny. But sexism makes for good theater, and the exposure of sexism by the drag king as the basis of masculine realness serves to unmask the ideological stakes of male nonperformativity.

While the drag king contest makes a perfect arena for the denaturalization of masculinity, assaults on natural gender and on the redundancy of the nature-nurture binary are appearing regularly in popular culture. For example, a great example of denaturalized identification was featured as a comic device in the 1995 movie *Babe*. This film tells the story of the little pig who wants to be a sheepdog partly because he realizes that pigs get eaten on the farm and dogs don't, and partly because all his primary connections and identifications are with dogs. *Babe* depicts the triumph of function over form when the pig, Babe, proves to be a better sheepdog than a sheepdog. The success of Babe's dog performance depends on assumption of the role "dog" with a difference. Babe does not merely mimic the chief sheepdog or try to look like a dog; he appropriates dogness, learns dog functions, and performs them. Whereas the master sheepdog presumes his superiority over the sheep, Babe refuses to construct a new hierarchy or to preserve natural hierarchies; instead, he proves his willingness and ability to herd and shows proper respect for the sheep and above all takes pleasure in his dogness. This film remarks on the comic disarticulation of dogness from dogs and suggests that the logic of the unnatural allows for pigs to be dogs, and in a moving subplot, it even allows ducks to be cocks or roosters.

The Drag King Show

The drag king contests at Hershe Bar set the stage for the proliferation of drag king nightclub culture in New York City. Although performance artists such as Diane Torr remind us that drag king culture has existed on and off for the last decade or so in New York performance spaces, drag kings have never generated the subcultural life and popularity that they now enjoy. After the drag king contests, many of the contestants disappeared back into lesbian club life, but many others regrouped and took on drag king performances as a regular act. Drag king Mo B. Dick recalls that the Hershe Bar contests identified a pool of potential drag king performers, and she capitalized on this moment of exposure by holding drag king parties. Mo recalls: "I started doing parties with Michael, better known as Misstress Formika, and then we decided to host a drag king contest. It was so successful that we decided then and there, with Misstress Formika's help, knowledge, and inspiration, to start a drag king club, and Club Casanova was born."³⁴

Club Casanova may well be the only weekly drag king club in the country. It is an East Village club catering to a mostly white, punk, alternative crowd that combines gay and straight, queens and kings, and it is often packed with media representatives. The women of color who competed in the Hershe Bar contests have not, for the most part, reemerged in the drag king club scene. The 1996 winner, Dred, does perform regularly at Club Casanova and other lesbian bars, and she sometimes performs alongside another black drag king, Shon, but there is definitely a muted presence of women of color on the drag king scene. In the Hershe Bar contests, many of the women of color who competed, as I suggested, were not necessarily making themselves into drag kings; they were going onstage and parading their own masculinity. This may be one reason that many of the winners of the contests have not become drag king performers.³⁵ Another reason may be the usual divisions of race and class that produce segregation in most urban lesbian bar scenes.³⁶

Although few of the women I interviewed about drag kings had much to say directly in response to the question of why so few women of color seemed to get involved in the drag king shows, many of the women had very contrary memories and opinions about the Hershe Bar contests. Obviously, I personally found the Hershe Bar contests to be very entertaining and full of the spectacle of dyke masculinity. But many of the white women

who competed in the contests found them dissatisfying. Mo B. Dick compares them to a popularity contest or a beauty contest: "If the crowd liked your look, you won," she notes, "if they didn't, you lost." Mo B. Dick felt annoyed that so many of the women in the contests were not drag kings but just "very butch women." Performance artist and occasional drag king Shelly Mars was a judge of some of the Hershe Bar contests. Mars also felt the contests were uninteresting: "The first one was ridiculous—no one got dressed up to do drag. Also, it is a black and Latina place, so if you are a white girl, you are not going to win." Indeed, few white women did win the Hershe Bar contests, and while this may have much to do with the fact that the club's clientele was mostly black and Latina, it also says something about the performance of white masculinity and masculinities of color. Much white drag king performance revolves around parody and humor, and much black drag king performance has to do with imitation and appropriation; whereas a white drag king might parody a macho guy from Brooklyn (as Mo B. Dick does), a black drag king tends to lip-synch to a rap song or perform as a mackdaddy or playboy or pimp character (as Dred does), not to parody, but to appropriate black masculine style for a dyke performance. In the context of a contest, the genre of sexy appropriations of male masculinity went over much better than the genre of quick parody.

Some of the best white drag king performances and shows, however, do evolve out of a creative and hyperbolic parody. Every week, Club Casanova becomes the scene of new and outrageous drag king performances. One week the flyers for Club Casanova advertised an Elvis night: Elvis impersonators could get in free, and the crowd was to be treated to not one but three performances of Elvis, all done by different drag kings. That night, the tension built as the crowd prepared for what must be a special event in the world of male impersonation: the kinging of the King. The first Elvis, performed by Justin Kase, enacted the early Elvis. Kase, with slicked-back hair and a curled lip, sang "Blue Suede Shoes." The next Elvis took on the leather-clad, jet-black-hair look of the King's middle years. Lizerace, the drag king deejay at Club Casanova, performed this sixties Elvis with much hip wagging and sultry looks at the crowd. Finally, drag king Murray Hill stepped up to capture the King in his golden years. Hill wore a tight white jumpsuit with sequins and the requisite monster upright collar. He wore dark shades and sweated profusely despite the towel around his neck. As the first bars of "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" swelled in the background, the fat Elvis jumped back and missed his cue to start singing.

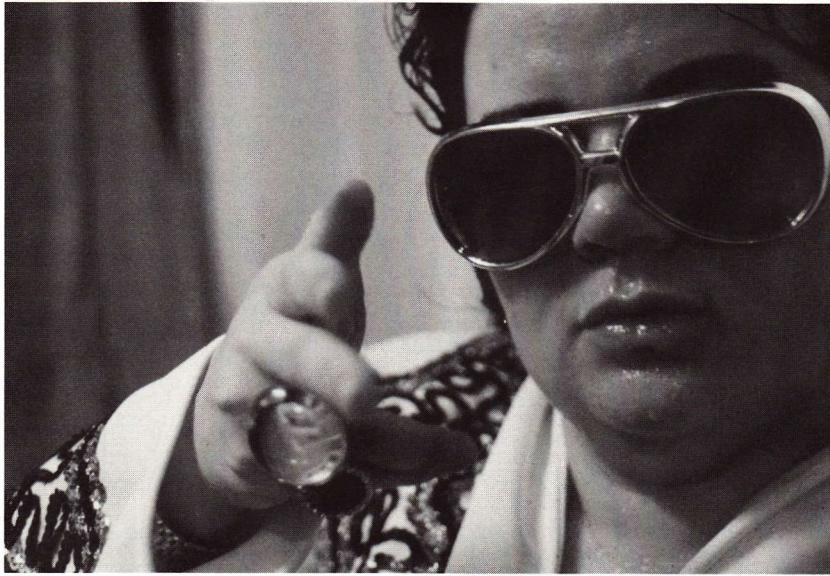


Figure 35. "Who Loves You Baby? Murray Hill as the Puffy Elvis," by Matthew Sandager (1997). Photo courtesy of the artist.

This hilariously bloated performance of Elvis at his gorgeous, puffy best captures what in drag queen culture has been called "camp" but what I am renaming here as "kinging."³⁷ Although earlier I identified one mode of kinging as an earnest performance of masculinity, here the kinging mode is realized through the impersonation of impersonation. This kinging effect is hilariously used by drag kings in San Francisco, where the success of Elvis Herselvis has spawned Elvis Herselvis impersonators.

It seems very important to hold on to the differences between drag kings and drag queens. Within the theater of mainstream gender roles, femininity is often presented as simply costume whereas masculinity manifests as realism or as body. In her study of female impersonators, Newton describes the way that drag queens create plausible impressions of femininity through the use of props (wigs, dresses, jewelry, makeup, hormones) and through "role playing" (*Mother Camp*, 109). Similarly, drag kings produce a plausible masculinity using suits, crotch stuffers, facial hair, and greased hair. In general, however, the theatrical performance of masculinity demands a paring down of affect and a reduction in the use of props. Drag king Maureen Fischer, for example, describes how she produces drag masculinity: "The way a woman moves is more fluid and sexy,

and a man is much more tight and restrained. When I perform Mo B. Dick onstage, I have to be very conscious of my movements. Usually I move around a lot, but as a man I am much more rigid, and I hold my body a certain way, and it's much stiffer in the torso, and there's no wiggle in the hips."³⁸ The production of gender in the case of both the drag queen and the drag king is theatrical, but the theatrics almost move in opposite directions. Whereas the drag queen expands and becomes flamboyant, the drag king constrains and becomes quietly macho. If the drag queen gesticulates, the drag king learns to convey volumes in a shrug or a raised eyebrow. The drag king shows at Club Casanova have provided many examples of what I call "kinging," or performing nonperformativity. To "king" a role can involve a number of different modes, including understatement, hyperbole, and layering.

Understatement. Kinging can signify assuming a masculine mode in all its understatement, even as the performance exposes the theatricality of understatement. An example of this mode would be the drag king who performs his own reluctance to perform through an "aw shucks" shy mode that cloaks his entire act. In the B52's performance that I described earlier, understatement characterized the drag king roles as they interacted with the far more frenetic drag queens.

Hyperbole. Finding the exact form of masculine hyperbole can constitute another form of kinging. In the Elvis performances that I discuss, the fat Elvis played by Murray Hill clearly captured masculine hyperbole. By performing the older Elvis, Hill played Elvis playing Elvis. While femme hyperbole plays on the outrageous artificiality already embedded in social constructions of femininity, masculine hyperbole imitates itself. Murray Hill, indeed, is the master of hyperbole. His repertoire includes a range of middle-aged male icons, and Murray satirizes and parodies the forms of masculinity that these men are supposed to represent. For example, as Bela Karolyi, the Olympic women's gymnastics coach, Murray Hill parodies the image of benevolent paternalism that the coach represents. In a hyperbolic performance of Karolyi urging little Kerri Strug to make a vault despite her wounded leg, Murray yells "You can do it!" at a limping Kerri (played by Murray's drag girl sidekick Penny Tuesdae). Murray then tells Kerri that if she makes the vault, he will let her eat, and finally he gropes Kerri and then rips her gold medal off her neck and begins celebrating his own victory. Murray Hill also performs as John Travolta.

The impact of Murray Hill's hyperbolic performance is to expose the



Figure 36. "Murray Hill as Bela Karolyi and Penny Tuesdae as Kerri Strug," by Tanya Braganti (1997). Photo courtesy of the artist.

vulnerability of male midlife crisis. Murray uses very little makeup and relies mostly on clothing to convey the image of masculinity that she parodies. She does not bind her breasts and makes no attempt to create male realness. In her most recent drag king endeavor, Murray Hill ran for mayor on the slogan "A Vote for Murray Is a Vote for You." Murray campaigned with flyers of Mayor Giuliani in drag and highlighted the hypocrisy of Giuliani's trying to shut down certain queer clubs when he paraded in public in drag. Murray announces: "Mayor Giuliani has decided that only he can do drag shows." Murray pronounced himself the "nightlife candidate" and urged voters to work together to save New York's endangered nightlife.

Layering. When a drag king performs as a recognizable male persona (Sinatra, Elvis, Brando), she can choose to allow her femaleness to peek through, as some drag queens do in a camp act, or she can perform the role almost seamlessly. In these seamless acts, the reason that the performance looks "real" is because if the audience sees through the role at all, they catch a glimpse not of femaleness or femininity but of a butch masculinity. So the male role is layered on top of the king's own masculinity. Drag kings such as Justin Kase or San Francisco's Annie Toon and Elvis

Herselvis build their acts precisely by layering a masculine performance over a butch appearance. This form of layering often produces a very sexy drag king act that encourages lesbian audiences to applaud not the male-ness they see but the dyke masculinities that peek through. Dred and Shon's rhythm and blues acts are often greeted by a crowd of screaming fans. Shon comments on this response precisely by remarking on layering: "Well, I like getting the reaction from the women, the screaming and all that. . . . They like the show, more than I would think. . . . I didn't expect them to be this into a male image. But then I don't think it's really about that, it's about the person the image is connected to, really."³⁹

Layering really describes the theatricality of both drag queen and drag king acts and reveals their multiple ambiguities because in both cases the role playing reveals the permeable boundaries between acting and being; the drag actors are all performing their own queerness and simultaneously exposing the artificiality of conventional gender roles. As Newton puts it: "Female impersonators are both performing homosexuals and homosexual performers" (*Mother Camp*, 20). Most of the female impersonators interviewed by Newton were gay and made connections between gay life and drag life; in the case of male impersonators, however, the relationship between their drag acts and their sexual orientations is less clear. Many of the drag kings performing in New York, at least, are lesbians; some are straight, and others are transgendered. Obviously the drag king act, with its emphasis on costume and makeup, disguise and transformation, produces a certain amount of curiosity about what is under the suit. Although many queer king club goers indulge in fantasies of dominant masculinity layered over queer masculinity, mainstream coverage of the scene tends to evince the sincere hope that even though girls will be boys, they will eventually return to being very attractive girls. Indeed, nothing brings more satisfaction to mainstream observers of the world of gender bending than the kind of pseudo-drag king spread featuring Demi Moore in a recent issue of the men's magazine *Arena*. Demi wore a small goatee that she had made in authentic drag king style by gluing pieces of her own hair to her face, but as she glowered for the camera, she ripped open her shirt to reveal her bounteous breasts. The whole photo spread gave "redundant" new meaning: her bodice-ripping act suggested, of course, that her unveiling would dispel the mystery created by her facial hair, but truth be told, she was not so convincing anyway as a man.

Some drag kings such as Dred and Buster Hymen, for example, will

also strip down to reveal the woman behind the man. Performance artist Bridge Markham tries to take this one step further by taking the stage in full female drag and then stripping all the way down to a G-string and nipple tape. Ripping off her wig to reveal an oddly androgynous bald pate, she begins a reverse strip and remakes herself onstage as a drag king now complete with eyeliner, mustache, and a dildo thrown casually into her handkerchief pocket. Bridge's act plays off the standard drag queen move in which the drag queen pulls off her wig to reveal that she is truly a man. In Bridge's act and others like it, the idea is to resist revelation and insist that each layer is as unreal as the last. In a humorous and indeed raunchy rendition of the reverse strip, London drag king Jewels performs a gyrating striptease in which he pulls off his hat, his jacket, his shirt, and finally his trousers to reveal . . . another shirt, another pair of trousers, another male costume. Jewels's antistrip parodies the notion that a true feminine self lies just beneath the masculine surface and can be accessed in a few deft moves.

Some drag performers object to the striptease as part of the drag act. The Club Confidential organizers, Stafford and Jordy, have pretty firm ideas about drag king performance, and they identify bad drag king theater as a combination of lack of planning, wearing bad shoes, and doing "butch striptease."⁴⁰ Mo B. Dick also indicates her disapproval, saying that it takes far more concentration "to stay in character" than to disrupt the drag character. She also comments that "stripping gets tired, and it also appeals to some voyeuristic tendency. . . . It's too easy to strip and be a girl, for God's sake, you're a girl every day." Mo B. Dick summarizes: "The drag king persona is quite difficult to take on and maintain, and somehow the strip act diminishes that effort." Dred explains her striptease as a way of representing the full spectrum of her gender display. Dred says that the strip lets people know "that I am a woman in drag, I think it is powerful to show that." However, Dred also acknowledges that it is not always so easy to prove this point. On an appearance that she made on the Maury Povitch show, Dred was onstage with other drag queens and kings, but s/he was dressed as a drag queen with a big wig. When she stood up and pulled the wig off to reveal her bald head, the audience thought she was revealing that she was "really" a man, and they loved it. When Povitch explained that Dred was a drag king and not a drag queen, the audience was confused and could not believe that Dred was female. Other audiences, of course, are a lot more sophisticated and can read multiple code shiftings from male to

female, from one brand of masculinity to another (from superfly to soul man), from tough drag king to sexy stripper.⁴¹

So if the striptease in the drag king act reveals nothing about sex or gender, about real selves or authentic bodies, where do we look for the real or for something like identity? Identity proved to be a very difficult question for many drag kings to answer. Many drag kings in New York felt that drag gave them the chance to really play with gender in a way that expressed a wide range of identities. Few of the Club Casanova kings would identify themselves as butch offstage, and many talked about themselves as androgynous or even femme. Lizerace, the twenty-three-year-old drag king deejay at Club Casanova, calls herself "androgynous" and says this label gives her "more space to maneuver."⁴² Dred, twenty-five, says of her offstage persona: "I'm not butch or femme, just whatever I'm feeling right then. I don't have a type of woman I go out with, either. I do have a lot of masculine energy, but I also like people knowing that I am a woman in drag." Evil Cave Boy, a twenty-seven-year-old performance artist, echoes these sentiments: "Sometimes I'm very masculine, sometimes very feminine depending on my situation; I go back and forth all the time."⁴³ Evil Cave Boy elaborates her gender position further by comparing herself to "a freak, a muse, a joker, a clown." Performer and actor Shelly Mars, who is thirty-six years old, also feels that she is some combination of masculine, feminine, performer, and "changer": "I change all the time—drag king is just a joke term for me. I'm a girl-boy, a tomboy, a changer, a performer." Like Evil Cave Boy, Mars articulates a very literally performative sense of her gender—it changes because she changes roles and characters constantly. To occupy a stable persona, for Mars or Evil Cave Boy, would mean renouncing their commitment to the theatricality and mobility of all roles. Fluidity, indeed, seems to define many of these drag kings' relations to gender expression, and few of them articulate a sense of feeling definitively bound to a category or a mode of expression.

It needs to be said that some of these women who refuse to have the label "butch" attached to them personally actually have quite masculine appearances. Lizerace is very boyish, and she cultivates a masculine persona offstage. When pushed on the issue of her butchness, Lizerace admits that she doesn't identify as butch because she feels she cannot "live up to the label." Another drag king who has a semimasculine appearance, Shon, aged twenty-nine, gives herself a more complicated label: "I am an

aggressive femme. I am not going to say that the masculinity I perform is not a part of me, but I also have a feminine side." For Shon, the label "butch" does not adequately address the fact that she feels her femininity or femaleness is an important part of who she is. Shon, however, drives women quite wild in drag, and when she performs with Dred in their rhythm and blues show, she is a devastatingly convincing performer and male impersonator who endows her act with a smooth sexiness. "If I were a guy, I'd be a gentleman," Shon tells me. "I'd always sit with my legs crossed, I'd be very suave, very cool, a kind of quiet storm." The idiosyncratic term "quiet storm" perhaps hints at the kind of gender variance that Shon names as "aggressive femme"; what she produces here is a phrase that would express both her strong masculine appeal and her female embodiment. Shon rejects the label "butch," feeling that it doesn't describe her particular masculine blend.⁴⁴

One New York drag king expresses an affirmative connection to the labels "butch" and "transgender." She is a twenty-eight-year-old drag king who goes by the names Retro and Uncle Louis and calls herself a "transgender Asian Pacific Islander." She comments that she often passes as a man, even at her workplace. Retro thinks that it is quite unusual to be out as a butch or transgender Asian woman, and she says that "many Asian dykes tend to identify as femme." Retro also suggests that "butch" carries a certain stigma among the New York drag kings and that few women, even those who really are butch, will identify with that term. She also notes that there is little to no transgender presence within the New York scene, and she comments on the difference in this regard between San Francisco and New York. Ultimately, however, Retro emphasizes that the New York drag scene offers a safe space for gender experimentation: "If a femme girl comes to the club femme one week, in a mustache the next, and even more in drag the next week, people will encourage that and be supportive of even straight women trying out their drag personas."⁴⁵

The drag scenes in New York, London, and San Francisco, at least, are growing and branching out all the time. I know of at least one performer in New York, Murray Hill, who regularly performs for straight audiences at a heterosexual singles bar. But the rest of the drag king shows are confined to queer spaces and mostly take place in gay male bars on lesbian nights. Many of the drag kings talk about turning drag king performances into a career, and they wait anxiously for the breakthrough moment when a drag king will hit the jackpot and appear on prime-time TV. Murray Hill



Figure 37. "Murray Hill for Mayor—The God Bless America Show at Club Casanova," by Vivian Babuts (1997). Photo courtesy of the artist.

and Mo B. Dick speak of trying to appear on the *Rosie O'Donnell Show* or on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Dred and Shon cite the example of Ru Paul and suggest that they could do for drag kings what she has done for drag queens. Shon notes: "I think this could really fly, and whoever kicks it off could have some great opportunities." Other kings such as Retro maintain a wait-and-see approach and view the drag king claim for fame as part of a New York mind-set. In New York, Retro says, "Everyone has a blinding ambition to be a star." When drag kings do hit the mainstream, and I think they will, let us hope it is not as another supermodel in a mustache. Let us hope that it's Murray Hill doing an outrageous parody of male midlife crisis or Dred as a smooth mackdaddy or Shon as a teen idol or Mo B. Dick winking at the girlies and poking fun at male homosexual panic with his signature line: "I ain't no homo!"

Conclusion

A theatrical tradition of male impersonation emerged at the turn of the century as a public display of cross-dressing subcultures. When male im-

personation faded out as a mainstream theatrical tradition, it did not reemerge within dyke bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s. Contemporary drag king culture in queer dyke spaces manifests in two different modes: first, in the antitheater of the bar drag king contest, and second, in the elaborately produced shows at drag king clubs. In the contests, we notice a lack of performativity within drag king presentations that can be attributed to the fact that dominant male masculinities tend to present themselves in the register of the real, eschewing the performative and the artificial. For this reason, the challenge of the drag king performance is to bring to light the artifice of dominant masculinity; this is often accomplished by highlighting the tricks and gadgets of the sexism on which male masculinity depends. Minority masculinities emerge from the drag king performance as multiple articulations of various relations between racial and gendered embodiment and theater. Some drag kings display butch realness as a relay of identifications and disidentifications between masculinity and female bodies; some drag kings highlight the performative in the guise of femme pretenders; others still merely mimic maleness and leave the bond between masculinity and maleness intact. The drag king shows, however, use various techniques to parody, imitate, appropriate, and remake male masculinity. In 1997 the mayor of New York City made a prime-time public appearance in female drag, but thanks to the efflorescence of drag king culture, drag kings now have their own candidate. Murray Hill is running for mayor, and female masculinity is on the ticket.