

“DRAG PERFORMANCE IS NOT YOUR SALVATION: BE CAREFUL WHAT OPPRESSION YOU WREAK BY EMBRACING IT”

Dr. Fenton Litwiller
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management
University of Manitoba



**University
of Manitoba**

TERMS

- Sex assigned at birth (AFAB, AMAB, intersex). This assignment is based on measureable organs, hormones, chromosomes, etc.
- Gender identity: an internal sense of gender
 - Cisgender: Sex assigned at birth matches internal sense of gender
 - Transgender: Sex assigned at birth does not match internal sense of gender (oppositional)
 - Genderqueer: Sex assigned at birth does not match internal sense of gender (in between)
- Sexual orientation: who you are physically, spiritually, emotionally attracted to (lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual)
- Gender expression: a demonstration of gender that is culturally understood (through dress, mannerisms, behavior, interests) (masculine, feminine, androgynous)
- Queer: gender and sexual minority people (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer), an understanding of the fluid or non binary nature of gender, label-less desires, beings and doings of gender

▪ Fenton Litwiller, Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, Critical Conversations (2019)



CONTEXT

- Drag has traditionally been, and continues to be, a context to perform an oppositional gender as a drag queen or drag king
- Butler (1990): the reason why some queer audiences take so much pleasure and joy in consuming drag is that the performance illuminates quite clearly that the normative gender framework, including categories of sex assigned at birth, gender expression, and gender identity are fabricated and differentiated because the imitation is imperfect.
- Drag is subversive but also oppressive in ways that marginalize members of the queer community



METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

- Cisgender (4) or transgender (1) drag artists participated in interviews that asked them to critically reflect on local drag culture
- Critical thematic analysis (CTA) to examine the interrelationships between interview talk, social practices, and power relations
- All text that follows within quotes are from interviewee talk



ANALYSIS: TRANSMISOGYNY AND CISGENDER PRIVILEGE

- Normative drag performance and culture (cisgender artists who perform an oppositional gender): “doesn’t include trans women and it can’t answer the question of what drag looks like for us that doesn’t undermine our gender, doesn’t re-establish us as men, doesn’t provoke our own dysphoria (the distress felt when assigned sex and gender identity do not match), profoundly.”



ANALYSIS: TRANSMISOGYNY AND CISGENDER PRIVILEGE

- Normative drag then, is “not a form that includes trans women and it’s as much parodying us and perpetuating those things which marginalize us”.
- “the privilege of drag is you already have your gender and your identity that’s accepted and in place in the community”.



DRAG RACE, STRAIGHT CULTURE, AND THE EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

- “every Pride season it gets more and more oppressive because that’s when rural [people] come to the city to look at the queers. They all think I’m a drag queen, and they all think I’m bad at it because I’m not high femme. I find my lack of attention to the details that would have me regarded as a cisgender woman is an obstacle to my inclusion among trans women my own age and this [queer] community and I think that it comes very much from [drag] culture”.



DRAG RACE, STRAIGHT CULTURE, AND THE EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

- Drag Race has reached a mainstream audience, influencing a cultural recognition of professionalized drag as a particular kind of gender identity that all people who queer gender in nonbinary ways in the everyday (and not just in performance) should strive for.



CONCLUSION

- To be transgender is not to be in drag
- Equating drag and trans “misconstrue what gender expression is for many people in their real lived lives”.
- Drag performance is an opportunity to counter hegemony, express joy about a gender identity that is real, or an attempt to align the doing and being of gender.
- It is not the practice of drag performance that is necessarily inherently transphobic and transmisogynist. Problematic are cisgender drag queens who lay a possessive claim to a singular notion of drag and who make visible the axis of gender through transphobic mockery, as well as a public that fetishizes drag identities as a public spectacle of allyship.



QUESTIONS?

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada



Research
Manitoba

- Baroness Von Sketch Drag Race

