



Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene

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“In my last life, I was a mackdaddy.”

—Dred, winner of the 1996 N.Y. Drag King Contest

**Judith
Halberstam**

Queer Masculinities in Focus

Over a period of a year, I spent time in New York and London attending shows, contests, and cabarets and interviewing drag kings about their performances, their identifications, their relations to masculinity, and their understandings of different genres of masculinity. This essay represents just one piece of a book in progress on drag kings, which combines interviews, analysis, and performance descriptions with photographs by London-based photographer Del LaGrace (fig. 1). In our book project, *Drag Kings: Queer Masculinities in Focus*, Del and I define the drag king as a performer who pinpoints and exploits the (often obscured) theatricality of masculinity. The drag king can be male or female; she can be transgendered; she can be butch or femme. The drag king might make no distinction between her off-stage and on-stage persona or she may make an absolute distinction; she may say that on- and off-stage personae bleed into each other in unpredictable and even uncontrollable ways. The drag king may be extremely self-conscious about her performance and may have elaborate justifications and theories about what she is doing, or she may just think of her act as “having fun” and make no further claims for it. In general, the drag kings that we worked with tended to be lesbian women, and in London many were transgender; in New York, many identified as androgynous or femme, but only a few identified as butch. Most of the drag kings who performed regularly were white, but a few of these performers were black women; in drag king contests many more black, Asian, and Latina women participated.

This chapter of my drag king research interrogates the relations between masculinity and race within both theatrical cabaret-style performances by drag kings and within nontheatrical walk-on appearances by drag kings in drag king competitions.¹ While there are obviously all kinds of interesting gender performances at work in the drag king scene, this essay attempts to locate the intersections of gender with race and class in

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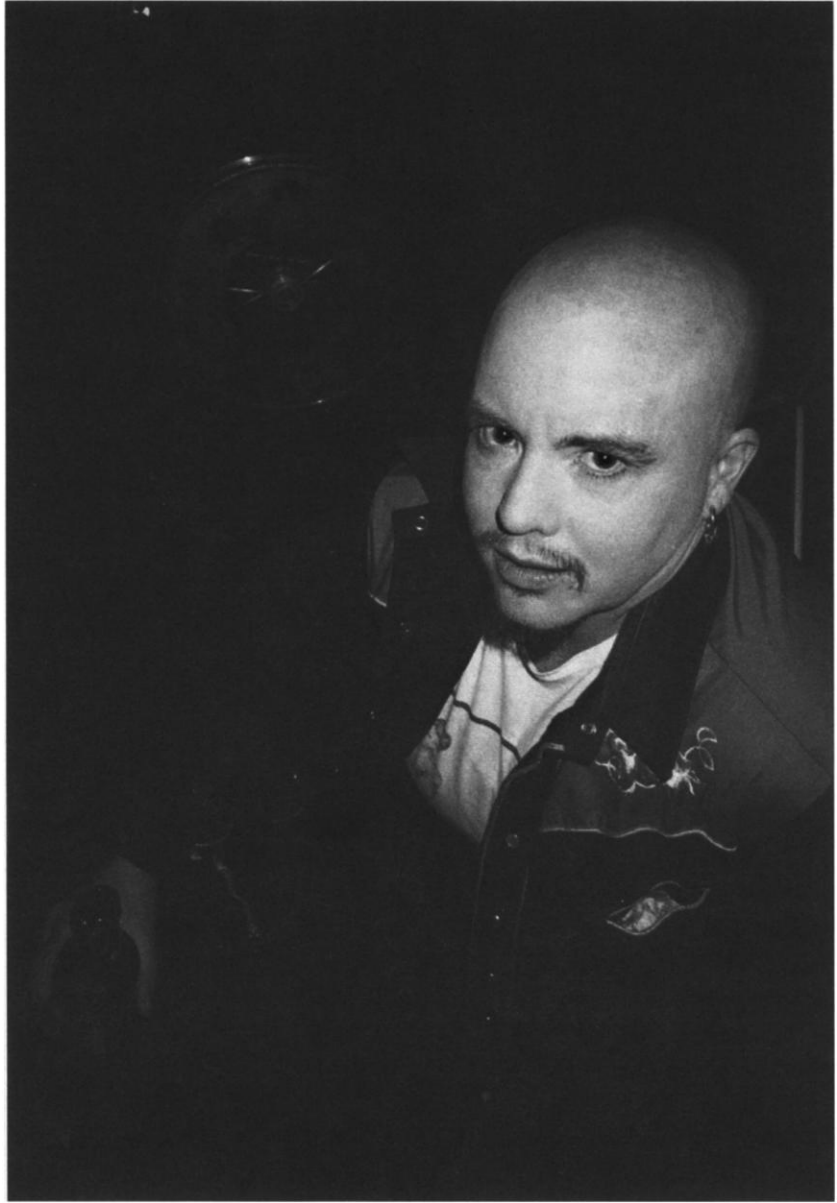


Figure 1: Del LaGrace Volcano, Club Geezer, London 1997.
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drag king culture in general and in a few specific acts.² I begin with a consideration of nontheatrical drag king appearances in the contests staged at HerShe Bar in 1996 and then move on to the rehearsed acts that developed out of those contests. I note the preponderance of drag kings of color in the early contests and the paucity of drag kings of color on the cabaret circuit in New York that developed in part as a consequence of the excitement generated by the contests. Masculinity within the drag king act is always inflected by race, class, and gender and by the histories of different lesbian communities and their different relationships over time to butch-femme styles and to female masculinity in general. In tracing a pre-history for the black drag king, I suggest that we have to consider the cross-dressing performances of some blueswomen from the 1920s and 1930s as evidence of some kind of tradition for black male impersonation. My purpose here is not to provide a history of male impersonation by black women in the first half of the century, but only to create the possibility of different traditions of cross-dressing and drag for different lesbian communities and to suggest that the history of female masculinity itself and drag king culture is necessarily multiple.

How to Talk to a Drag King

I actually began this project thinking that I would find a subcultural world of butch women, creating and exploring new masculinities and performing their own relations to the constrictions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I thought also that at least half of the women I would meet would be women of color and that white masculinity presented more of a challenge when it came to turning it into a drag king performance. My first extended exposure to the drag king scene involved regular visits to drag king contests staged at New York's HerShe Bar in 1996. Most of the women I saw competing in these contests were butch women of color who were thrilled to be called on stage to display their masculinity to the immense approval of a large audience and who were competing for cash prizes. These mini drag king appearances were raw and unadorned. Many of the butches who went on stage did so not because they had developed elaborate drag king acts, but because they already passed as men in their daily lives and relished the chance to be applauded and even financially rewarded for their ambiguous gender appearance. As the contests wore on, it became clear that some women took the drag king challenge very seriously and began to create costumes and looks and to cultivate masculine aesthetics. The winner of the 1996 HerShe Bar contests was Dred, a black woman who carefully cultivated a superfly look—a blend of 1970s blaxploitation masculine styles—and parlayed it into a stunning and unanimous drag king victory.

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A year later, drag king culture flourishes in New York, but now it is mostly white women performing. Few of the women of color who competed in the HerShe Bar contests have entered the cabaret circuit. But at the time, the HerShe Bar contests made a startling contrast between white masculinity and masculinities of color: the rapping and dancing of the black drag kings and the cool gangsta aesthetic of the Latina and Asian drag kings made the white drag kings look quite dull by comparison. Historically, we could say, white masculinity has represented itself precisely as nonimitative and nonperformative, so any masculinities that are associated with performance tend to therefore stand out as suspect—a man who is too immaculately groomed, for example, may fall under homophobic scrutiny, and black masculinity tends to be represented as always in excess of some white ideal of self-restraint.³ The white drag kings in New York and London originally may have been stumped by the impenetrability of white masculinity; however, their inventive performances in the flourishing nightclub scenes of Elvis, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, beatniks, 1950s greasers, lounge lizards, and geezers suggest that white drag kings have found the soft underbelly of white masculinity. Their performances tend to erode the myth of self-sufficiency that props up hegemonic masculinity and reveals its dependence on the vilification of working-class and queer masculinities as well as masculinities of color.

Relations between white drag kings and drag kings of color are complicated. Many of the white drag kings with whom I spoke saw the HerShe Bar contests as unfair and as popularity contests rather than as true drag king competitions. The MC from Club Casanova, white drag king Mo B. Dick, recalls the HerShe Bar contests as frustrating. When I asked Mo B. what she thought of drag king contests, she responded: “I like them as long as they are entertaining, although I have been to some, the HerShe Bar ones for example, which were awful because the women entering them wouldn’t do anything. They just walked up on stage, and it was like a beauty contest or a popularity contest; if the crowd liked you or your look you won, if they didn’t you lost.”⁴ Mo B. fastens on to the nontheatricality of the contests and suggests that many of the winners were not even what she would call drag kings; to her they were just “butch women.” She tells a story about the contests that exemplifies her frustration: “One night at HerShe Bar I was so insulted because this very baby butch woman won, and I had gone to great lengths to prepare: I wore a killer sharkskin suit, I did my pompadour, you know, I was stylin’, . . . and I was working it and she just went up there on a whim in an outfit she wears every day.” Mo B. points to an interesting inconsistency in the HerShe Bar contests: very often a handful of women—mostly white but some women of color—would prepare elaborate costumes for the competition only to be upstaged by a particularly cocky butch, usually a woman of color, who played to the crowd and just strutted around. While I find such inconsis-

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tencies to be evidence of the rich variety of drag king masculinities, many of the drag kings who prepared at length for the contests felt that the gulf between the theatrical drag kings and the nontheatrical drag kings made a mockery of the event. These tensions were only deepened by the fact that many of the nontheatrical kings were women of color and many of the theatrical kings were white.

I have learned through this urban ethnography that academic theorizations have a limit and that there are often huge gaps between the kinds of knowledges and “facts” we produce as “theory” and the kinds of knowledges and facts that are there to be learned in subcultural venues. Very often, as in my discussions with various drag kings about the HerShe Bar contests, my theories about drag king acts would meet with some opposition from the women I interviewed. It was not necessarily that we disagreed over what had happened, but we might disagree on how to interpret it. I have had to learn how to talk to drag kings so as not to cancel out their definitions and interpretations and so as to find some common ground between my investments in the project and their own. For example, noncontinuities between my own expectations and my findings during the interview process came about during my discussions with drag kings about gender. Many of the drag kings I interviewed had quite elaborate ways of articulating their understandings of drag king culture and drag king genders, but their theories of culture or gender bore an extremely complex and indeed ambiguous relation to what circulates as “gender theory” in academia (and some of the kings knew some gender theory and were familiar with both Judith Butler’s and Esther Newton’s work). Following Judith Butler’s immensely useful and influential book *Gender Trouble*, academics have tended to think of gender as “performative.”⁵ However, this notion of performativity was quickly bastardized as the book became required reading in university settings and a ubiquitous point of reference within popular discussions of gender-bending. The concept of performativity as it began to circulate widely was quickly reduced to some notion of fancy dress within a costume-party atmosphere. Butler herself calls this “the bad reading” of *Gender Trouble*, and she describes it in *Bodies That Matter* as the notion that “one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night.”⁶ Some people, in other words, had advanced voluntarist interpretations of gender performativity and believed that Butler’s book described identities that we took on at will. Such readings, of course, actually ran counter to the much more prescribed notion of gender performance that Butler laid out so carefully in the earlier book. Imagine my surprise then to find that drag kings, in New York at least, produced some version of the “bad reading” of Butler as their rationale for drag, perfor-

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mance, and identity. Some literally did describe waking in the morning and picking clothes and genders out of closets and hanging them up at the end of the day. I read such self-understandings as elaborate identifications, rather than the naive misunderstandings of the mechanics of identity that they sometimes appear to be.

Of course, there are excellent reasons why nonacademic theories of gender identity may diverge sharply or even run counter to academic ones. Academic theory does not have to be beholden to subjective experience in any linear way, and indeed much theory becomes useful to the extent that it advances beyond the merely descriptive and takes the risk of providing shapes and forms for subjectivity. The boldness of Judith Butler's theorizations of queer subjectivities is precisely the reason that so many academics have turned to them for so many different projects. The fact that drag king descriptions of their genders actually contradict Butler's productive notion of performativity confirms in a perverse way Butler's premise that gender is a construction that looks natural and sometimes feels chosen. Indeed, as I have argued in my book on *Female Masculinity*, it is the very elasticity of the gender binary in particular that allows the biological categories of male and female to hold sway, despite widespread proof that the binary has been engulfed by local and folk productions of wild gender.⁷

This project treads that ever-elusive boundary between popular and academic culture and attempts to translate academic abstractions into practical demonstrations of Butler's lovely and now priceless phrase "gender trouble." It also responds to Gayle Rubin's call for empirical projects on gender and sexual communities that can convey "the rich complexity of erotic meaning and conduct" and can trace "the topologies and political economies of erotic signification."⁸ However, if the call for empirical projects acknowledges the fact that all too often academic theories ignore the so-called real world, it is worth pointing out that the "real world" also ignores theory at its peril. Indeed, in the absence of theoretical models of drag, the drag king scene can be quickly dismissed by popular media as a glorification of male masculinity or as evidence of a lesbian fascination with men. Theories of drag king performance are able to mobilize the assault on male privilege that is implicit in many of the acts and to transform this assault into discourse.

If I feel the need to defend my intellectual project here, it is at least in part due to the fact that in some of my interviews with drag kings, the interviewees expressed frustration at my insistent questions and constant formulations and interpretations of performances and looks. What I was doing by questioning, looking, and learning was sometimes placed in opposition to what others were doing—namely, "having fun." In other words, if I would only loosen up about my categories of drag acts, my

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Figure 2: Judith (Jack) Halberstam. © 1996 by Del LaGrace.

strategies of impersonation, my forms of butch drag—the reasoning went—I would soon be able to sit back and have a good time, maybe even get up on stage myself! Let me stress that all this baiting was very friendly and was received as such, but I do want to reassure both the kings and prospective readers that the research and writing for this project has been nothing but fun for me and that my desire to explain and describe and make sense of the drag acts I have seen has been my way of taking pleasure in the shows. By presenting my thoughts here, I am finally on stage (fig. 2). Furthermore, I believe that the sense I have tried to make of the vagaries of drag king performances is far preferable to many of the

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accounts of the scene that appear in the popular media. By preserving and presenting a small slice of drag king culture in all its complexity, I hope to counter the mainstream media representations of drag kings as supermodels in mustaches. While big magazines like *Penthouse* and *Marie Claire* try to use drag king culture to bolster their decidedly hegemonic and conservative notions of gender and sexual normativity, this book expresses my interest in precisely what is queer about drag kings and their performances.⁹

Histories of Male Impersonation and the Emergence of the Drag King

In 1996 a spate of drag king contests became the rage in the New York lesbian club circuit. Eager to check out the masculinities on show in such contests, I began to regularly attend the contests. The first time I went, the contest was billed at the center of the evening's entertainment, and it seemed to have attracted an unusually diverse dyke audience. Finally the lights dimmed, and the evening's MC took the stage. Ten mostly white drag kings filed out onto the stage 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 show was a huge success in terms of producing a spectacle of dyke 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 upon to "do something," one after another just muttered his name: their acts were located in "being" a drag king, not "doing" a drag-king act. As the contests grew in popularity, they also became more interesting, in part because they began to highlight the contrast between white masculinities and masculinities of color. By the fifth contest, more women of color had entered the competitions, and the drag kings, generally speaking, had become a bit more active. There were a few rappers, some dancers, more than a few wits and comics, and lots of costume and finery. White masculinity, the contests seemed to show, presented different problems for drag king translations than black or Asian or Latino masculinities did.

White masculinity proves difficult to perform for many drag kings except through a distinctly parodic mode. We might explain the nontheatricality of dominant white masculinity by noting that masculinity in white men often depends 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 mas-

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culinity “just is,” while 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 films like *Wayne’s World* or on TV sitcoms like *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, 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 about male insecurity expose momentarily the instability of mainstream fictions of fortified male masculinities.

Of course, 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 masculinities that appear to be performative or staged stand out as suspect and open to interrogation. White masculinity for the drag king has to be made visible and theatrical before it can be performed, while masculinities of color have already been rendered as visible or invisible, theatrical or nontheatrical in their various relations to dominant white masculinities. White and black male impersonation also have very different histories in the United States.

The histories of both male impersonation and the drag king act are quite difficult to map out, if only because they tend to be subsumed under the larger categories of female drag and impersonation and tend to disappear in all analyses of camp. Furthermore, histories of male impersonation tend to focus on white actresses and do not allow for very different productions of drag in communities of color. The very recent history of the drag king (as opposed to the male impersonator) proves to be quite subjective. Indeed, 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. Some scholars have traced the use of the word *drag* in relation to men in women’s costume back to the 1850s, when it was used for both stage actors playing female roles and young men who just liked to wear skirts.¹⁰ 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 an essay on “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.”¹¹

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While both male and female impersonations were fairly common in the nineteenth century in England and America, it was only female impersonation that took on a gay subcultural life in the first half of this century. Male impersonation was made into a theatrical art in England by Victorian actors like Vesta Tilley and into a popular theatrical practice in America by actor Annie Hindle and others. Hindle had hundreds of female admirers, and she specialized in realistic male impersonations: she shaved regularly to try to effect a shadow of a mustache, and her low voice added to the overall impression of a sexy masculinity. Lisa Duggan reads female-to-male cross-dressing practices of this period as “the seeds of a new identity” and as a practice far more complex than “temporary or superficial disguise.”¹² The fact 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, as Duggan suggests, 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. It seems that after the passing of the 1933 Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code, which banned all performances of so-called sexual perversion, male impersonation died out as a mainstream theatrical practice.¹³

We do know of one or two famous male impersonators from the first half of this century, and interestingly enough they were African American. Gladys Bentley, the famous blues singer of the Harlem Renaissance, regularly cross-dressed in a tuxedo and sang songs about “bulldaggers.” Many of her contemporaries, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters, also peppered their lyrics with allusions to “mannish women” and “sissy men,” and together they suggest a lively African American lesbian tradition of butch desire and male impersonation. In an essay on sexuality and the blues, Angela Davis discusses the overtly lesbian lyrics of Ma Rainey’s “Prove It on Me Blues”: “Ma Rainey’s sexual involvement with women was no secret among her colleagues or her audiences; and, in fact, the advertisement for this release consisted of a drawing of the blueswoman sporting a man’s hat, jacket and tie and obviously attempting to seduce two women on a street corner.” Davis claims that the evidence of such overt advertisements of lesbianism by some blueswomen in the 1920s “suggests that the influence of homophobia within the black community was not so powerful as to enshroud lifestyles that challenged the stereotypical notions of women’s realities.”¹⁴ I think we can also say that this advertisement provides evidence of not only overt lesbian identifications but also a lively culture of cross-dressing.

Hazel Carby, in an essay that situates “the sexual politics of women’s blues” within the historical context of black migration, argues that songs

by Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey “express a contempt for a society that rejected lesbians,” and in general she comments that the woman blues singers “had assertive and demanding voices” and showed “no respect for sexual taboos.”¹⁵

While Davis and Carby both gesture toward a recognition of the staging of gender variance within black women’s blues, neither critic has yet fully explored the implications of male impersonation within these performances. The drawing of Ma Rainey in full drag, for example, trying to seduce women on the street corner certainly says plenty about the visibility of her lesbianism, but it also suggests the popularity and even relative acceptability of a particular form of lesbian drag. The image of the blueswoman in drag singing to another woman also guards against what Ann DuCille has called “the feminization of the blues,” which she describes as the mass production “of the black female as sexual subject.” DuCille cautions against the tendency she sees within African American cultural theory to make the blues “the metonym for authentic blackness,” and she suggests that we look carefully at the effects of commercialization upon the politics of cultural production.¹⁶ While it may well be true that sex, as DuCille notes, “was a subject more safely sung by black women than by black men,” we have to modify this claim in relation to the cross-dressed black woman singing as a black man to another woman!¹⁷ Carby describes women blues singers appropriately as “liminal figures”¹⁸ who explore sexual potential. Liminality, indeed, clearly marks the cross-dressing blues singer and makes her into a paradigmatic figure of sexual agency. Indeed, performances by black blues singers involving male impersonation suggest a lively and extended history of male impersonation within black communities; analysis of such a tradition should inform all theories of black masculinity. Black butch women in the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when much male impersonation was presumed to have died out, clearly produced their own forms of black masculinity within blues performances and possibly generated a long tradition of black female masculinity.

One African American performer from the 1940s carried on the tradition of black butch cross-dressing performance. Storme DeLaverie, of the Jewel Box Revue, made male impersonation into the totality of her act. In Michelle Parkerson’s film about Storme, Storme suggests that she just fell into male impersonation without thinking about it. Storme was good friends with a gay man who worked at the Jewel Box Revue, a multiracial female impersonation show, and she was enlisted one day to help out. She donned men’s clothes and cut her hair short for the show, but—she insists—“the funny thing was I never moved any different than when I was in women’s clothes. . . . I walk the same, I talk the same.” Storme has a lovely baritone voice, and that coupled with her handsome features makes

her utterly convincing and charming as a male impersonator.¹⁹ Storme also talks a little about growing up as a mixed-race person in the film—“I grew up hard in New Orleans with my mixed blood”—and the documentary allows the viewer to assume that part of what made Storme so convincing as a male impersonator was this layering of mixed identities. Storme embodies a version of liminality that, on stage, she turns into a stunning performance of masculinity.

Furthermore, Storme’s articulation of her own masculine performance calls attention to the lack of theatricality involved and emphasizes the continuity between her movements as a masculine woman and her actions as a male impersonator. When trying to explain, in Parkerson’s film, what it means to be a male impersonator, Storme comments that, in a way, it is easier than being a female impersonator. The male impersonator, says Storme, “has to take things off,” while the female impersonator has to add things. This notion of the paring down of gender attributes to achieve masculinity also suggests why male impersonation might seem less dramatic than its counterpart. Theater, after all, is about drama and costume, action and lights; but the art of the male impersonator relies upon understatement and cool macho, rather than theatricality and histrionics. As we will see later, this presents a bit of a problem when it comes to making a real act out of male impersonation. The difference between a male impersonator and a drag king (a term Storme would not use to describe herself) must depend, at least in part, on the ability of the drag king to make a show out of male impersonation. The theatricality, or lack thereof, in the drag king performance depends, for example, on whether the performer is attempting to reproduce dominant or minority masculinities, whether she relies totally on impersonation, or whether her own masculinity flavors the act.

Some critics have used the career of Storme DeLaverie to show that pockets of male impersonation still existed within subcultural gay male drag culture between the 1930s and the 1960s.²⁰ 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, Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis, in their Buffalo oral histories, comment that the masculinity constructed by butches in the 1940s and 1950s was accompanied by a “puzzling lack of camp.”²¹ Kennedy and Davis dispute Sue Ellen Case’s notion of the butch-femme couple “inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit”²² and argue that the queen and the butch do not share parallel histories; indeed, the most striking difference between these two figures of inversion may be demonstrated in the lack of a lesbian drag culture. “Few butches performed as male impersonators,” they write, “and no cultural aesthetic seems to have developed around male impersonation” (75). Kennedy and

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Davis, along with other cultural commentators, tend to attribute the lack of lesbian camp to the asymmetries of masculine and feminine performativity within 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 the passing butch cannot afford. *Camp* in this context clearly refers to a somewhat ironic gender practice within which gender traits are exaggerated for theatrical and often comic effect.

Many of the observations that we now take for granted about the relations between drag, gender, and role playing were first made in Esther Newton's classic study of drag queen cultures, *Mother Camp*.²³ Camp, according to Newton, relies on "incongruity," and it represents a "system of humor" (109) within which conventional relations between art and life, reality and representation are turned upside down. In her ethnography of stage and street impersonators in the 1960s in Chicago and Kansas City, Newton extrapolates a theory of gender from her observations of the drag cultures she studies. "Drag," Newton writes, "questions the "naturalness" of the sex role system *in toto*" (103). Newton recognizes the importance of drag and camp to gay male culture, and she also comments on the dearth of any parallels to drag and camp within lesbian culture. She writes:

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. (5)

Some twenty-five years later, in an essay titled "Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen," Newton returns to these important theoretical problems and begins to pick her way through the complicated terrain of butch camp and drag king theater.²⁴ In this essay she interrogates an interest in drag among lesbians through the spectacle of a butch dyke who competes in a drag queen contest on Cherry Grove. When the butch in a queen's drag wins the contest, Newton notes: "Joan's victory was both subversive of *and* submissive to male power" (180). But Newton also admits that despite this lesbian appropriation of camp, there is little evidence of a long tradition of either lesbian camp or drag king culture. She attributes this at least in part to the "overwhelming emphasis upon the queen" within the camp system, which, Newton continues, "has acted to disempower the 'king' role that butch gay men or lesbians might logically have played" (173). It seems indisputable that camp has not worked for "kings" and that therefore different systems of humor and different cir-

cuits of performance and theater must be corralled in order to make the king role interesting.

Various theories circulate about why there have been so few drag kings, even in the lively butch-femme bar culture of the 1950s, and why in the 1990s drag kings are becoming a permanent feature of lesbian club scenes. While it is not my intention here to definitively name the causes of an efflorescence of drag king culture, I think that they probably lie with new and different relations between lesbians and public space. But I also wonder whether the claims about an apparent lack of a lesbian drag culture depend on the historical sources available to us. Could it be that while white lesbian communities produced no drag culture, black lesbian communities have housed and nurtured drag performances that remain hidden from the historical record? Did the cross-dressing performances of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley in the 1920s and 1930s and the male impersonations of Storme DeLavarie in the 1940s spill over into a drag king scene in African American lesbian communities from those eras? These questions may not be answerable, but the evidence does suggest that different traditions of drag exist for different communities. When we look more closely at contemporary drag king culture, we notice that white masculinity remains a somewhat difficult object of parody, but black masculinity seems fully available for repetition, impersonation, and appropriation. From the superfly heroes of blaxploitation films to funk masters like James Brown and George Clinton, black masculinity offers a fertile ground for drag theater. As we continue to develop accounts of lesbian history, then, it seems necessary to specify the communities in question and resist making generalizations about lesbian culture based on the studies and oral histories of white lesbian communities. As I will argue, lesbian communities remain fractured and segregated to this day, and this fact alone suggests the need for separate histories.

Nightclubbing

Lesbians produce wildly divergent masculinities in many different cultural arenas. In this section, I want to explore the various confluences between race and gender in drag king spaces. Simply put, many lesbian scenes are severely segregated, and the clubs that cater to women of color have a different relation to drag king performances and to the performances of alternative masculinities in general. While I run the risk of oversimplifying and generalizing by making distinctions between white clubs and clubs for women of color, the risk seems worthwhile because it allows me to suggest that what we recognize as “drag kinging” in one

space may pass unremarked in another. In Club Casanova, for example, an East Village drag king club, the woman dressed in drag is usually up on stage and is read immediately as a drag king; but in other clubs where strict butch-femme codes pertain, as in some Latino/a clubs, for example, a woman in a suit and tie is definitely not on stage and is not going to be read as a drag king.

In London, New York, and San Francisco, the drag kings who perform regularly in the clubs tend to be white. The drag king contests, however, as I mentioned earlier, do often draw women of color up on stage to compete. It seems strange then that while the contests should attract so many women of color, the drag king clubs actually feature very few acts by black, Asian, or Latina drag kings. How do we explain the predominance of white drag kings in urban scenes? Obviously, as I said earlier, to a certain extent the drag king clubs represent the same kind of segregation that characterizes urban lesbian scenes in general: the mainstream clubs tend to attract white women, and women of color populate other lesbian clubs depending upon the neighborhood and the music that might be played there. In New York, the clubgoers at HerShe Bar tend to be lesbians of color, while at clubs like La Escuelita and Krash, they are largely Latina. Club Casanova, on the other hand, which is a small East Village bar, draws a somewhat mixed, but largely white crowd of men and women.

Interestingly, in queer spaces that cater predominantly to women of color, in New York at least, many of the women participate in elaborate and creative versions of butch-femme style; more white spaces, on the other hand, favor a kind of androgynous or alternative aesthetic (piercings and tattoos). Obviously, one can easily overgeneralize about these things, but there is a noticeable difference, at least on the surface, between the look of a club like HerShe Bar and the look of one like Club Casanova. Many of the drag kings I interviewed in New York attested to a kind of racialized separation of cultural spheres. The white kings tended not to go to HerShe Bar, and women of color tended not to come in huge numbers to Club Casanova. Since butch-femme already exists as a noticeable style within some of the spaces for women of color, one might expect that these clubs would produce a more vibrant drag king culture. This was not true. In a club like La Escuelita, a Latino/a drag bar, all of the drag performances are by men, and men perform both male and female drag. In HerShe Bar, the contests, as I have mentioned, did manage to draw women of color up on stage from the audience, but many of these women had not dressed up in drag and simply paraded their butchness to great applause, maybe throwing in a quick rap or a few dance steps. The HerShe Bar contests did manage to induce more women into the drag king scene, but these did not include a large number of women of color.

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The claims I am making here about segregated lesbian club spaces is borne out by even a cursory glance at historical work that has been done on U.S. lesbian communities in the twentieth century. In their oral history of lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1960s, Kennedy and Davis say that they set out to tell the stories of what they assumed was a “racially mixed community” in the 1940s and 1950s; but as they began their interviews they discovered that “the public lesbian community during this period consisted of two subcommunities, black and white, and that integration began to take place only in the middle 1950s, and did so without undermining the separate identity of each.”²⁵ Their study shows that some lesbian spaces did contain both black and white women, but “nevertheless, two semiautonomous communities with distinct histories existed” (16). Kennedy and Davis, however, had a difficult time telling the distinct history of black women who primarily associated with black women; they were able to conduct interviews with black lesbians who had socialized with white women, but they did not uncover much information about those black lesbians whose social life did not revolve around white women’s bars.

Another history, this one focusing on African American lesbian nightlife in Detroit between 1940 and 1975, suggests why the history of black lesbian communities has been harder to locate: “One reason historians of lesbians have not been successful locating lesbians of color might be that they have assumed bars have been the center (both theoretical and actual) of lesbian communities.”²⁶ This historian, Rochelle Thorpe, claims that many black lesbians socialized at private parties held in homes where food and drink were served illegally and where dancing with other black queers was the main attraction. Thorpe convincingly argues that black women were loathe to frequent white lesbian public spaces because of pervasive racism; when they were admitted to white lesbian bars, it was on the assumption that they would not try to date white women. Black butches might be singled out as potential troublemakers, and black femmes were often read as heterosexual and barred entry.

Much lesbian history tries to locate the racial segregation of public lesbian space as a thing of the past; this, however, would suggest that fully integrated queer spaces are representative of the present. While some clubs like HerShe Bar do tend to attract a wide range of women of color—including black, Latina, and Asian women—a split between clubs that attract white lesbians and those which draw lesbians of color does linger on. Few of the drag kings I spoke to in either New York or London were willing to address the issue of racially split lesbian spaces, but the lack of women of color in the East Village clubs and the smattering of white women in the midtown clubs spoke to the persistence of differently racialized spaces.²⁷

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No Diggety: Black Masculinity and the Drag King Act

Two black drag kings who did find their way into regular drag king performances from the HerShe Bar contests are Shon and Dred, who often perform together. Shon, twenty-nine, and Dred, twenty-five, have a wide range of performances; while Dred's signature act is a mackdaddy from the disco era, Shon is stunning as a hot, crotch-grabbing rapper (fig. 3). Shon and Dred both won HerShe Bar contests and went on to compete in the final showdown against each other. Shon remembers seeing Dred in an early contest: "I said she's definitely gonna win, she's got it! She was excellent. I liked the name, I liked the presence, and I could tell she was good. As a performer myself, I always look for true dramatic talent."²⁸ Dred thinks Shon is a "smooth" drag king, and she remembers seeing Shon as her major competition in the Grand Finale contest; ultimately, the contest came down to the two of them, and it was Dred who walked away with the title. In the earlier contest that she won, Shon recalls that she was asked to answer a question on stage. The question was "What does it mean to you to be a drag king?" And Shon answered, "It means showing men and women how women should be treated." This answer is very much in keeping with Shon's smooth drag king persona, and it won her plenty of fan support. Shon noticed that more women of color entered the contests as time went on, but she also noted that many of these women did not dress up in drag: "They went up with what they had, rather than in drag; they might be boyish naturally or just butch-looking."

Both Shon and Dred comment on the dearth of women of color who are interested in becoming drag kings. In a Jackson Five act that Dred and Shon put together, for example, they had to use men for some of the roles. They have a hard time explaining why more women of color do not get involved; but both are confident that as time goes on and as drag king popularity grows, more women of color will develop stage drag king acts. In their shows, Dred and Shon mix up the music and the style that each of them favors. In their fifteen-minute "R'n'B Old School Show" that they performed at HerShe Bar to an audience of screaming women, they included rap songs by Run DMC and did the duet "You're All I Need" by Method Man and Mary J. Blige. They also performed a hot and flashy rendition of "No Diggety" by Blackstreet, which actually reproduced the scenes of screaming female fan response that usually accompany live performances by Blackstreet.

Dred and Shon's show is an extremely entertaining combination of male impersonation, perfectly timed lip-synching, and choreographed dance moves. They manage to pull off close replications of the performers they imitate, and in many of their shows parody gives way to homage. If many of the white drag kings poke gentle fun at white masculinity, Dred

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Figure 3: Shon and Dred, N.Y.C., East Side 1996. © 1996 by Del LaGrace.

Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper

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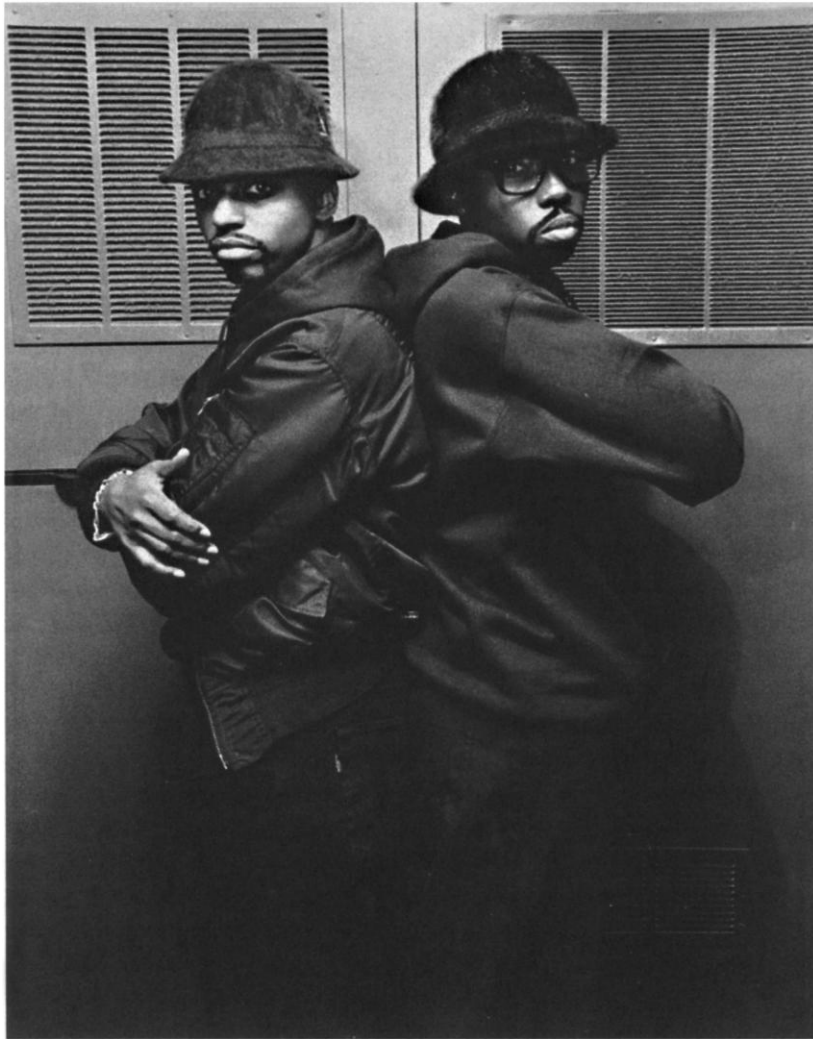


Figure 4: Shon and Dred as Run-D.M.C. © 1996 by Del LaGrace.

and Shon approach black masculinity from a very different angle. Dred comments: “We don’t make fun of the music of musicians we perform. We respect them.” Shon responds: “Word. I want to perform an image that I respect and that is respectable.” Dred amplifies on the meaning of *respectable* here: “Yeah, I’m not about to pull a dildo out of my pants or whatever; I’m not about that.” So what is their act about? Shon sums it up: “It’s like, I read a book because I am interested in it and I read a character in the same way.” Shon’s analogy to reading clarifies the elements of tribute, faithfulness to the original, and interpretation that mark her performances. She wants to conjure up an image of the person that she is

performing and capture his aura, but also transform him through the drag king performance into a more complex rendition of sexy masculinity. Also, she attempts to “read” a particular person or group or style because it holds interest for her and offers something back. Shon describes preparing her act: “If I’m trying to get Marvin Gaye, or someone like that who has a real aura, I’ll try to get his smile, the way he looks at a woman, or his moves. I want people to look at me and say, ‘Yeah, that’s Marvin!’”

People definitely look at Shon and Dred and like what they see. Many nights when they perform, the audience is packed with women really moved by their performances, screaming and waving to them and singing along with the words of the songs. Dred and Shon manage to pull off an incredibly sexy show that appeals less to the crowd’s sense of humor and more to their desires. Dred and Shon work the crowd well and manage to set up an exchange between themselves and what can only be called their fans. Of course, the venue makes all the difference. At HerShe Bar Dred and Shon often perform to a very active crowd who participate in the songs and interact vociferously with them. When Dred and Shon performed the same show at Club Casanova, the crowd was more subdued; many seemed spellbound by the performances but were less interactive. Dred and Shon ironically performed a Run-D.M.C. song at Club Casanova called “King of Rock,” and one African American woman in the audience called out, “Yeah, rock that white bullshit!” The song samples and pokes fun at some white rock anthems, and the spectacle of black drag kings performing “King of Rock” to a mostly white crowd enacted nicely the satirical dynamic between rap and rock that Run-D.M.C. sets up in the song (fig. 4).

Rap, of course, provides a particularly suitable genre for male impersonation because as a genre it already depends on the techniques of sampling and mixing, or as cultural critic Tricia Rose puts it, “repetition and rupture.”²⁹ Rose elaborates on the practice of sampling and discounts the notion that sampling is unimaginative copying or, more crudely put, cultural theft. She writes, “For the most part, sampling, not unlike versioning practices in some Caribbean musics, is about paying homage, an invocation of another’s voice to help you say what you want to say” (79). The association of sampling as homage clearly resonates with Shon’s comments about the way she tries to pay respect to black male icons through her various performances; the idea that sampling facilitates an artist’s coming into voice plays nicely with the scene of the black drag king using rap or R’n’B to articulate her desires for women. Indeed, when the drag king lip-synchs to rap, she takes sampling to another level and restages the sexual politics of the song and the active components of black masculinity by channeling them through the drag act for a female audience and within the queer space of the lesbian club.

Given the rather vexed relationship between women and rap, this restaging of the rap act has profound gender implications. In her book *Black Noise*, Rose expresses her skepticism about mainstream reactions to rap's sexism. She writes, "Some responses to sexism in rap music adopt a tone that suggests that rappers have infected an otherwise sexism-free society" (15). And she goes on to suggest that rap is overburdened with the responsibility for a more general problem of male adolescent sexism. When the drag-king rapper recycles rap songs, she reappropriates the sexist language of male adolescence and makes over a dangerous and hostile masculinity into her own queer masculine performance. Of course, the adoption of a misogynist song could simply reproduce misogyny in a different location, but Shon and Dred pick their songs wisely, and, furthermore, they move back and forth between a hard-hitting rap act and a smooth and soulful R'n'B blend of Heatwave, Isaac Hayes, and other classics. Also, their reproduction of rap and R'n'B acts within a queer context to transform the unremitting heterosexuality of the songs into queer black anthems.

As so many cultural critics have pointed out, two of the paradoxes of rap music are its widespread appeal to white middle-class consumers and the adoption of hip hop style by all kinds of white artists. Rose in *Black Noise* points out that such an interest in black culture on the part of white consumers and artists is nothing new; indeed, she suggests, "white America has always had an intense interest in black culture" (5). What is true, of course, is that white imitations of hip hop and rap have often met with substantial economic success and are generally not held up for scrutiny by white cultural commentators. Black rappers, on the other hand, may be very critical of white rappers. In the drag king scene in New York, there are a few white drag kings who perform rap. These white drag kings perform rap partly, one assumes, because the stylized moves of the rapper give the drag king something quite visible to perform. This drag king act both plays off the Vanilla Ice phenomenon of white-boy rap and captures the performability of black masculinity. Drag king DJ Lizerace cultivates a hip hop look and a homeboy sensibility. She regularly performs rap songs, sometimes lip-synching and sometimes actually rapping over the music (fig. 5). Lizerace most frequently performs Rob Base songs and Run-D.M.C., but she also throws in some Beastie Boys every now and then: "I do rap songs that I think people will like. I don't try to be the guy, I just take the style."³⁰ I asked Lizerace if she thought she was "dragging" or "kinging"³¹ black masculinity, but she answered, "No, I definitely don't think I am impersonating black men." She continued, "Nor am I impersonating a white boy who impersonates black rappers." What then? Why did she even choose to do rap? "It just happened. I like that music, and it seemed like the obvious thing for me to do as a drag king act." Even

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Figure 5: DJ Lizerace on the street, N.Y.C. 1996. © 1996 by Del LaGrace.

though Lizerace has a sense that she is not performing black masculinity, it is hard not to attach an ethnic masculinity to the rap performance. Also, one has to question the urge to disassociate rap from blackness and to try to make it into simply another version of “pop.” Significantly, Lizerace seems to fear being accused of trying to perform something that she is not entitled to perform; her reluctance to connect her performance to racial drag speaks to some of the anxiety about identity that crops up when cross-racial performances are in question.

Dred relates that she once performed at Club Casanova as George Michael. She comments: “I decided to do a George Michael song; I loved the song, but I wondered if it would be OK and whether it would go over alright. I decided I could pull it off because this particular song had an R’n’B influence to it. . . . I was concerned because he was white, but in the end I loved doing it and people loved the performance.” Cross-ethnic performances raise obvious concerns about the meaning of the performance and the ability of the drag king to pull it off in a convincing way. It is also obvious that the performance of whiteness by a black king and the performance of blackness by a white king have very different meanings and resonances. While Dred’s performance of George Michael calls attention to the black influence already present in his music, Lizerace’s performance of Rob Base both reproduces and calls into question the appropri-



Figure 6: Uncle Louie and Lizerace, N.Y.C., West Side 1996.
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ation of black culture by white performers. Dred and Lizerace come up with very different strategies for dealing with this particular knot of concerns. Lizerace tries to emphasize the availability of all masculinities to all performers and argues for a kind of universal access. Accordingly, if she does a Rob Base song, that song is multiply translated through both her masculinity and her rap performance and becomes something very different; it becomes part of the transformation that the drag king act brings about. Dred suggests that one should approach such cross-ethnic acts carefully. She emphasizes that she felt good about performing this particular George Michael song because the song had an R'n'B feel to it and it was something that she felt she could pull off. She too is producing an interpretation of an act, rather than an impersonation, but she advocates a careful consideration of what the music, the singer, and the drag king performer bring together.

Retro, twenty-eight, also engages in cross-ethnic performance. Retro is an Asian American drag king who often performs as an “Uncle Louis” who is a “white trash American truck driver from upstate New York, newly out of prison”³² (fig. 6). Retro feels that there is real power in performing this character and transforming his potential racism into other kinds of expression. She says: “Having experienced a lot of racism as a transgendered Asian Pacific Islander, I took a lot of pleasure in being able to spoof the visual image of a white trash guy. I don’t play him as a racist

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guy, however. He has a heart of gold, and he's like what gay men call a 'daddy' or a 'bear.'" Retro, then, uses her cross-ethnic performance to tap into the homoerotic potential of the white trash guy and to eliminate the almost essentialist racist component with which white trash masculinity has been associated. Retro also says that she has been developing an Asian drag character "along the lines of Kato, the Asian assistant to superhero character the Green Hornet." Retro loves this character because he is the "first nonsubservient Asian character" in comic books.

Club Geezer

In London, there are few women of color doing drag performances in the clubs, although some women of color do attend the clubs. Interestingly enough, however, the performers at Club Geezer are diverse in other ways—many of them are non-English, and the regular performers make up a mostly European cast of characters: Stanley is from Greece, Hans is Austrian, Del is American, Hamish is Scottish, Simo is Italian, and there is also a Brazilian drag king who performs occasionally. These national differences play an important role in the kinds of masculinities and performances that the London kings produce. The London kings, though, are all also quite conscious of the lack of women of color in the club and at a loss to explain it. These drag kings, however, do recognize the ways in which their masculinities operate as raced and classed masculinities, and some are quite adept at describing these functions. Stanley, most notably, talks specifically about what form of white masculinity she taps into, especially when she leaves the space of the club and ventures out in the streets in drag: "My neighborhood is populated by gays and blacks and some Turkish immigrants, and I am Greek. But in drag, I seem to embody a very Anglicized chic masculinity which I very much desire but which also sends strange and conflicting messages to the people in the streets."³³ Stanley elaborates further that she is not simply concerned that she may be a target for queer bashing, "but I really do have questions about what it means to parade my white imitation of upper-class masculinity in this particular neighborhood." In this extremely important articulation of the meaning and effects of white masculinity, Stanley manages to reveal how it is that white masculinity becomes visible—either it is turned into a spectacle of working-class masculinity, as in many of the Club Geezer drag king acts, or, as in this formulation, it becomes a chic and almost arrogant form of upper-class masculinity. Stanley very bravely states her ambivalence about this performance in terms of her desire to inhabit that particular form of powerful masculinity, but also in terms of the effects of "parading" this performance in particular neighborhoods.

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 associated with
 such social
 approval.

As Stanley suggests, the successful “pass,” for some white drag kings, allows them to tap into empowered versions of maleness and gives them at least temporarily some kind of access to the pleasures and liabilities associated with such social approval. Stanley notes the pleasure she takes in such upper-class chic masculinity, but she is also aware that this privilege could play out differently in the streets of her mixed neighborhood, where white maleness and male whiteness become an affront to the less privileged masculinities that she encounters. For the drag king of color, the “pass” only accesses another kind of trouble. Dred tells a story of trying to hail a cab in New York while out in gangsta drag: “I had my Adidas outfit on and my hat pulled down low. It took me thirty minutes to catch a cab because cabs would slow down then they would see me and speed by. It felt horrible” (fig. 7). Dred admits to sometimes feeling safer in drag, but she also feels that it is brave to go out on the streets in drag. As her cab incident shows, masculinity, at least for the kings of color, is no guarantee of access to forms of social privilege.

For the time being, the drag king scene continues to reflect the social stratifications that exist among lesbians in general. The shows of the women of color and the white kings appeal to different audiences and are accorded different receptions depending on where they are performed. The drag kings who venture out into the world in drag also experience very different treatment depending on whether they are white or black or brown. For this reason, it would be foolish to pretend that racial differences and racial disharmonies do not affect drag king cultures. The preponderance of white drag kings in the drag king scenes in major urban areas, then, speaks to the cultivation of drag king theatricality in white spaces and a tendency toward butch-femme styles within some clubs frequented by women of color. Shon and Dred, however, represent a bold new horizon for kings of color as they tour the club circuit of New York, bringing smooth R’n’B, tough and tight rap, and nasty mackdaddy funk. They also, quite possibly, represent the culmination of a tradition of black female masculine performance from Gladys Bentley to the present. Perhaps it is this tradition that can truly tell the history of male impersonation and its effects, consequences, and pleasures in the twentieth century.

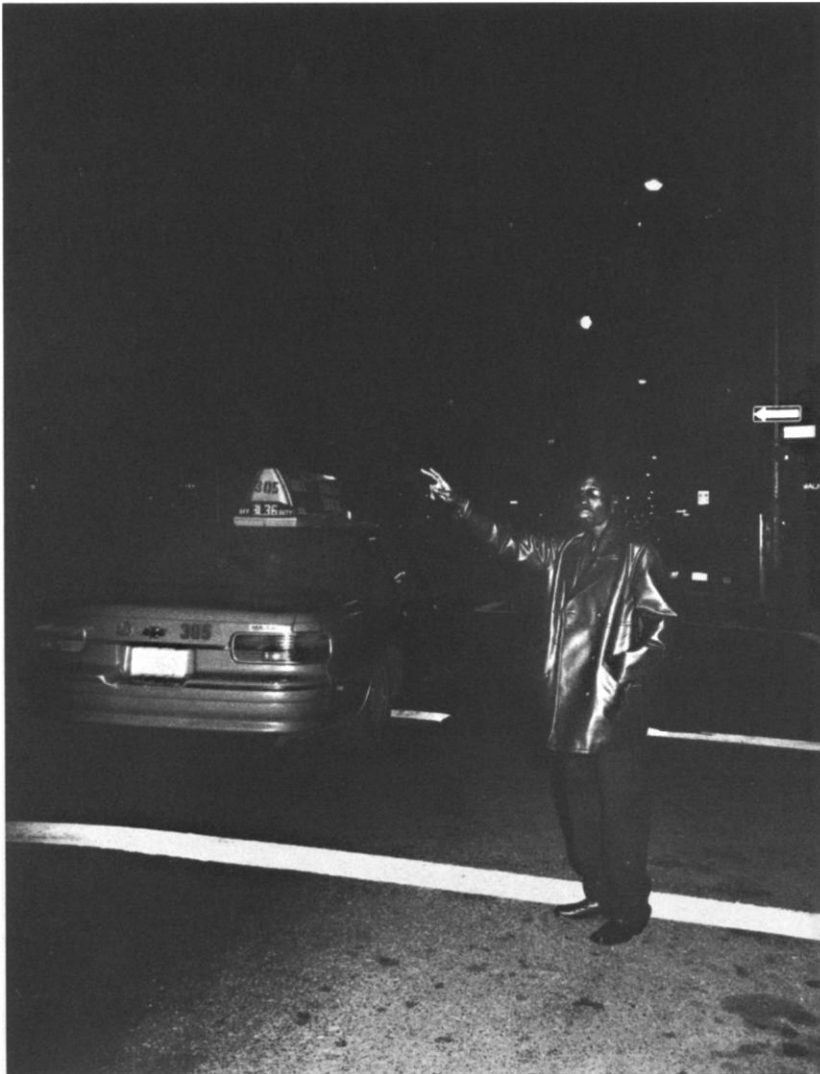


Figure 7: Dred hailing a cab, N.Y.C., 1996. © 1996 by Del LaGrace.

Material in this essay overlaps with the chapter on drag in my book *Female Masculinity*, forthcoming from Duke University Press. I would like to thank José Muñoz for his help with this essay and Esther Newton for her comments on drag in general. I am grateful to all the drag kings who graciously participated in the interviews and shared their opinions on drag, performance, and identity with me, especially Mo B. Dick, Retro, Dred and Shon, and Stanley. Del LaGrace generously allowed for the reproduction of his photographs here. His comments and support have been vital to the production of this essay. Thanks finally to Gayatri Gopinath for her many substantive comments on earlier drafts; her own work on queer diasporas has helped me to interpret the complexities of race and gender within many different queer cultural sites.

1. The distinction between *theatrical* and *nontheatrical* has to do with the ways in which the drag kings did or did not rehearse or prepare for their appearances as drag kings and did or did not present a staged and costumed masculinity. Those drag kings who I am calling *nontheatrical* were butch-looking dykes who paraded their own masculinity on stage as drag king masculinity and who did not dress up as men.

2. For a more general discussion of the drag king scene, see my chapter on drag kings in *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

3. For a historical discussion of the construction of an ideal of white masculinity as a paradigm of civilized humanity, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

4. All the quotations from Mo B. Dick are from a personal interview, 10 November 1996.

5. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x.

7. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

8. Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Traffic," interview with Judith Butler, *differences* 6 (summer–fall 1994): 79.

9. See the particularly offensive article on drag kings in *Penthouse* magazine for an extreme example of how drag king performances are eroticized by straight male journalists: Ralph Gardner Jr., "Drag Kings," *Penthouse*, February 1997, 84–86, 128.

10. See Elizabeth Drorbaugh, "Sliding Scales: Notes on Storme DeLaverie and the Jewel Box Revue, the Cross-Dressed Woman on the Contemporary Stage, and the Invert," in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Crossdressing*, ed. Leslie Ferris (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 120–43.

11. Laurence Senelick, "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage," in *Crossing the Stage*, ed. Leslie Ferris (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 82.

12. Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America," *Signs* 18 (summer 1993): 809.

13. Drorbaugh, "Sliding Scales," 124.
14. Angela Y. Davis, "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity in the Blues of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey and Bessie Smith," in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, ed. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (New York: Routledge, 1995), 259–60.
15. Hazel Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Radical Amerika* 20 (1986): 21.
16. Ann DuCille, "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (January 1993): 426.
17. *Ibid.*, 427 n. 21.
18. Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime," 22.
19. Michelle Parkerson, *Storme: The Lady in the Jewel Box Revue*, 16 mm/video, 21 min. (1987).
20. See Drorbaugh, "Sliding Scales," 120–43.
21. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather and Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62.
22. See Sue Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelone, Michele Aina Berale, and David Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 305.
23. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
24. Esther Newton, "Dick(less) Tracy and the Homecoming Queen: Lesbian Power and Representation in Gay Male Cherry Grove," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 161–93.
25. Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 16.
26. Rochelle Thorpe, "'A House Where Queers Go': African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940–1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 41.
27. This is also where interviewing becomes a very imprecise and clumsy method of collecting data. It is not fair to expect people who are actively participating in a growing cultural scene to be able to make accurate assessments about the way race and class work in those scenes. Also, the black drag kings may not have wanted to discuss racism within the lesbian community with me, a white interviewer, but might have been willing to discuss it with a black interviewer. Furthermore, the drag king scene is symptomatic of, rather than responsible for, a much longer history of race relations among lesbians.
28. All the quotations from Dred and Shon are from a personal interview, 30 December 1996.
29. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 78.
30. All the quotations from DJ Lizerace are from a personal interview, 10 November 1996.
31. *Kinging* is a word I have coined for the drag king performance in order to signify the way that it marks out different theatrical terrain from camp.
32. All the quotations from Retro are from a personal interview, 10 November 1996.
33. All the quotations from Stanley are from a personal interview, 8 January 1997.