

Microsyllabus: The Politics of Drag

Compiled by Kevin Henderson for the JCU Community

While drag may be as old as Shakespeare, drag queens and kings have been a significant feature of LGBT life since the formation of urban gay and lesbian communities in the early 20th century. Although the early gay and lesbian political movement (known as the homophile movement) often stressed gender conformity and middle-class respectability in order to win acceptance by the larger heterosexual society, drag queens and gender nonconforming people were at the forefront of the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, an uprising that incited widespread LGBT political organizing and inspired militant forms of gay and lesbian liberation. (And, drag queens, transgender people, and gender nonconformists were at the forefront of other, earlier important police confrontations and rebellions like the 1959 Cooper's Donuts Riots in Los Angeles and the 1966 Gene Compton's Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco.) Drag has been an important site of artistic expression and fascination for LGBT people and an important vehicle for political organizing and protest. Yet, far beyond being a form of entertainment or artistic expression, drag has also been a central object of academic study and academic debate. Indeed, anyone who would dismiss drag would dismiss some of the most important and ground-breaking academic texts from 20th century.

Drag is often described as sustained impersonation. A drag queen is thus a male impersonating a female. However, taking drag as an object of serious academic theorization has allowed scholars to question the very nature of male/female sexual difference and to formulate gender as a modality of power rather than an innate characteristic of a person. Drag exposes all gender as socially constructed, radically contingent, and connected to the shifting power of norms. Thus, one might say, drag exposes how *all people* engage in forms of sustained gender impersonation in so far as gendered subjectivity is compulsory. But, drag also brings into relief how gender norms can be subverted, undone, consolidated and remade. Drag, many academics claim, consequently has much to teach us about general forms of power and knowledge well beyond the LGBT community.

Drag also raises a number of questions about the relationship between gender and sexuality and modern forms of personhood. If gender and sexuality are not quite the same, why have gay men been fascinated with female impersonation and the figure of the diva? What can the figure of the drag queen or drag king tell us about desire and belonging in minority communities? What does drag teach us about race? How have African American, Latinx, and Asian American communities used drag to contest whiteness or national boundaries? What is the relationship between drag and the modern transgender movement? Is drag a pernicious form of appropriation or is *all* identity a form of appropriation and adoption? What does drag teach us about "realness" and "authenticity"? What is the relationship between pre-twentieth century forms of cross-dressing and modern forms of drag? How has the legal and administrative regulation of dress (particularly cross-dressing) attempted to produce normative and docile subjects? What can drag teach us about resistance, resiliency, and political struggle?

Following this line of academic criticism and questioning, I offer a bibliography and some possible lesson plans to facilitate critical discussions on drag.

- **Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss (Routledge, 1991).**

Judith Butler’s watershed 1990 text *Gender Trouble* may be one of the most influential texts of the 20th century. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler delineates how gender is not stable or innate but rather the product of regulatory regimes of power. Many other feminists made this claim before Butler, but Butler puts the relationship between sex and gender into new terrain. Because arguments for the domination of men over women were often made in reference to theories of the natural or biological superiority of men, feminists have long held a distinction between sex and gender. As the story goes, sex is natural or biological, but gender is cultural and social. If inequality exists between men and women, that inequality is a product of society and culture and therefore changeable. However, the persistence of sex as a biological category had the ironic, persistent effect of re-naturalizing gender. If gender is disconnected from sex, why is gender most often conceived as binary? The answer lies in how sex is often conceived as binary, and gender is seen to emanate from sex. And what is sex anyways? Is it genitals, hormones, reproductive capacities, secondary sex characteristics, structures of the brain? None of these things are continuous with one another, and various biologists and medical authorities are not in agreement with which of these categories and lines of continuity constitute sex. Butler exposes how sex is *always already* gender, insofar as sex is a gendered interpretation of the body. Sex is just as thoroughly cultural and social as gender. But, then, what is gender? By what social or cultural mechanisms is gender produced? And what is the status of the body if what was considered fundamental to the body is a product of power? The final chapter of *Gender Trouble* takes up these questions but requires some knowledge of Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, and others. “Imitation and Gender Subordination” is a condensed and simplified version of the second half of Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble*. In both *Gender Trouble* and her shorter article, drag is a central object and central analytic of theorization.

A drag queen raises a number of important questions for Butler: Is the man that appears in women’s clothes a man that is appropriating the essence of a femininity that does not properly belong to him? Or is it that the overt femininity that he displays proof that his essence is, after all, a feminine one, in spite of his male body? Is a man’s drag performance proof that his internal state is actually feminine one? Or, he is feminine only in appearance, his internal state being masculine? Drag exposes this unstable and indeterminate play between internal essence and external presentation. More importantly, the drag queen reveals that masculinity and femininity are performances—not essences. The construction of gender identities is produced through repetitive performances of behavior, physical stylistic expressions, without which the man/woman distinction has no sense. Thus the drag queen exposes gender as a cultural code which relies on imitation and reappearance, lacking any initial, essential truth.

Through the drag queen’s bodily approximation of the gendered norms of femininity, drag also shows how that performance has the *effect* of positing the notion of an original. The “original” appears retroactively, as if an essence was there all along. Drag is thus not

the putting on of a gender that belongs “properly” or “originally” to some other group, namely heterosexuals. Further, what a drag queen does is not fundamentally different than what heterosexual men and women do on a daily basis. Everyone is approximating gender ideals and citing norms through the stylized actions of their bodies: “In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized gendered are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect” (21). The “being” of being a man or being a woman is the effect of habitual performances, bodily actions, and speech acts. And, importantly, most people fail at the gender ideals posited by heterosexuality. This failure propels subjects into an endless repetition of these ideals. Thus, the wide variety of LGBT gender performances are not poor copies or derivations of original and true genders to be found within heterosexuality. Rather, LGBT gender performances are strategic and possibly subversive repetitions of norms that remake the space of what is possible and intelligible.

- **Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1972).**

Mother Camp is a groundbreaking ethnography of gay life in the 1960s. Newton, who did her field research while a graduate student under famed anthropologist David Schneider at the University of Chicago, was one of the first anthropologists to do ethnographic research on a gay population and the first to publish an academic monograph on drag queens. While many field-forming texts can lack a sophistication that is to be forgiven due to their early date, *Mother Camp* exhibits an unrivaled sophistication and nuance by even contemporary queer standards. The text would later become a fundamental source of ethnographic support for feminist and queer philosophical arguments, including Judith Butler’s formulation of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*.

Newton refuses to pathologize her research subjects and instead uses them to understand larger norms within American society. Newton often uses drag as a means to draw insight about larger aspects of American culture and gender. One of the first persons to articulate that gender is a performance, Newton describes how “men” create the artifice of womanhood while acknowledging, “of course, ‘women’ create the image ‘artificially’ too” (p. 5, ft. 14). Indeed, the performance of gender puts the stable categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ into serious question. Newton is well-known for her distinction between “overts” and “coverts” in the homosexual population: “The overts live their entire working lives within the context of the [gay] community; the coverts live their entire *nonworking lives* within it.” Stage impersonators lived very different lives than street queens. Stage impersonators, while on a continuum, tended to be overts, hiding one’s sexuality and cultivating the persona of a respectable straight man while not on stage. Street queens, on the other hand, were coverts and lived their entire lives openly in drag and had no pretense of appearing heterosexual. Stage impersonators often lived lonely lives while street queens faced violence and precarity reminiscent of contemporary accounts of queer and trans youth of color. Newton notes that racial segregation among homosexual men is not enforced, and black and white men mix, make friendships, and

make love more freely than their heterosexual counterparts. Still, savvy students versed in intersectionality will want more attention to race and will question Newton's understandings of "transy drag" and efforts by established stage impersonators to distance themselves from the figure of the transvestite. Most importantly, Newton's penultimate chapter "Role Models" provides a stunning examination of the naturalness of sex roles, the meanings of camp, and the way gender is an intersubjective performance rather than an essence (see especially p. 103). "Role Models" is full of so many ethnographic and philosophical insights that any summary cannot do it justice

- **Paris Is Burning, directed by Jenny Livingston (DVD or available on Netflix, 1991).**
- **Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning" in *Bodies that Matter* (Routledge, 1993).**

Paris Is Burning is a documentary about the "Golden Age" of Harlem ball culture in the late 1980s. Voguing originated in the Harlem balls and is prominently featured in the film. New York City's ball culture was a space where many working-class African Americans and Latinos and poor and homeless queer youth of color found community, support, and a space for personal and artist expression. The film covers important issues around homophobia, racism, poverty, HIV/AIDS, sex work, and street violence. Within ball culture, people joined "houses" (similar to a Paris fashion house) in which members adopted a family name and joined a kinship network with a house "mother." Members of a house practiced mutual care and competed against rival houses within the balls. The film is broken into a series of concepts that come out of Harlem ball culture such as the concept of "realness" which sheds light into the way the real is made through artifice rather than existing as an *a priori* fact. The contemporary TV drama *Pose* is a fictional dramatization of some of persons and events that appear in *Paris Is Burning*. *Paris Is Burning* can be paired with Judith Butler's chapter "Gender in Burning" in which she reads all gender as an appropriative practice and seeks to understand the nonnormative kinship networks that houses produce within ball culture. Butler's piece, tied with the rich stories of New York's black and latinx drag community, is a good rebuttal to those who would claim drag is a form of "black face."

- **J. Halberstam, "Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene," *Social Text*, No. 52/53. (1997):pp. 104-131.**

In this article, Halberstam provides a rich history of drag king culture with a special attention to race and racial formation. Halberstam elaborates on the nuances between racially split lesbian spaces both within cities and neighborhoods but also within the space of a single club. Through interviews with many drag kings, Halberstam complicates queer and feminist understandings of gender performativity. Halberstam writes that many of the academic theories of gender were met with opposition or tension by the drag kings Halberstam interviewed. Some provided "bad readings" of feminist academic texts like *Gender Trouble* and *Mother Camp*, but with interesting effects for both subcultural life and for the on-going life of these texts. Students interested in learning more about drag king culture can see Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith 'Jack' Halberstam's *The Drag King Book* (Serpent's Tail Press, 1999), which has several great essays and high-quality portraits of drag kings.

- **Clare Sears, “Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, no. 3–4 (2008): 170.**

In 1863, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors passed a law that criminalized appearing in public in “a dress not belonging to his or her sex.” Adopted as part of a broader anti-indecency campaign, the cross-dressing law became a flexible tool for policing multiple gender transgressions and the presence of racial minorities, facilitating over one hundred arrests before the century’s end. Sears looks at the development of laws around cross-dressing with increased fascination of gender deviants in dime museum freak shows. Linking 19th century regulation of dress to the present, Sears provides an important historical contextualization of the link between the public’s fascination with cross-dressing and the legal regulation of bodily difference. Present-day analogs might be how there has been a huge increase in transgender visibility in mainstream media and television shows and what appears to be increased acceptance of sissyboys, transwomen, and drag queens in shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* but increased cultural fascination often coincides with increased policing and the legal and administrative regulation of gender transgressions (such as the proliferation of bathroom bills or the cancellation of drag shows on college campuses). Students interested in learning more about this history can see Sears’s book-length treatment of San Francisco’s cross-dressing laws in *Arresting Dress* (Duke, 2014).

- **Genny Beemyn, “Transgender History in the United States,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (Oxford University Press, 2014).**
- ***Screaming Queens: the Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria*, produced by Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman (2005, available on Kanopy).**

Beemyn provides an excellent history of transgender practices in the United States. Many students will want to know more about how transgender practices and practices of drag overlap and diverge. Savvy students will likely bring up in other lessons that being a transgender person is not the same as being in drag. Because transgender is a modern term, many figures from the past who might be understood to be transgender today used the term drag queen. Indeed, such indeterminacy between identities often made coalitions and uprising against police violence possible. While queer theory often stresses indeterminacy and the blurring of boundaries over clear distinctions, Beemyn is careful to show why some practices are distinct for understand the larger history of gender and sexual regulation in the United States. Susan Stryker’s monograph *Transgender History* is also an excellent book-length resource for thinking about the historical overlap between drag and trans practices. Stryker’s and Silverman’s outstanding documentary on the Compton Cafeteria Riots, *Screaming Queens* (2005), would also be appropriate to show with this article. The Compton Cafeteria Riots was an pre-Stonewall uprising by drag queens, transgender women, male hustlers, and sex workers against police violence and harassment that was forgotten by the national memorialization of the Stonewall narrative but later resurfaced through contemporary transgender organization and anti-gentrification efforts in San Francisco.

- **David Halperin, “Irony and Misogyny” in *How to Be Gay* (Harvard University Press, 2012).**

Is drag misogynistic? Does gay men’s fascination with drag, particularly impersonations of desperate and degraded women such as Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*, elicit proof of gay misogyny? In nuanced detail, Halperin argues that “gay male culture’s embrace of degrading representations of the feminine is not an endorsement of them” but rather “the first stage in a strategy of resistance.” Halperin is plying his own twist on the familiar idea that by aligning themselves with certain forms—flamboyance, abject glamour, exaggerated femininity—gay men implicitly challenge the codes of patriarchal, heterosexist culture. Patriarchal culture is what demeans femininity and makes it appear histrionic—not gay culture. But, by identifying with the extremes of femininity, exposing its inauthenticity, and putting it back into social play, gay men transvalue it and can drain it of sexist meaning. In a celebration of faggotry, Halperin succeeds in showing how a push for hypermasculinity and normalcy shuts down some of the best insights from history gay culture.

- **José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction” and “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Crème Davis’s Terrorist Drag” in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).**
- **Kareem Khubchandani, “Lessons in Drag: An Interview with LaWhore Vagistan,” *Theatre Topics*, Volume 25, Number 3, September 2015, pp. 285-294.**

Disidentifications is a classic in queer of color critique. Muñoz looks at how those outside the racial and sexual mainstream negotiate majority culture—not by aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. Muñoz calls this process “disidentification,” and through a study of its workings, he develops a new perspective on minority performance, survival, and activism. Drag is an important vehicle for transforming the stuff of mainstream culture into disidentificatory practices and resisting the normalizing gaze of whiteness. In “The White to be Angry,” Muñoz explores the complex and multiple meanings of Vaginal Davis’s drag performances (who takes her name from Angela Davis in order to salute radical black organizing in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

In a witty and accessible manner, Kareem Khubchandani, whose drag name is LaWhore Vagistan, interviews himself to explore the pedagogical functions of drag and what it means to bring drag into the classroom. Khubchandani, a scholar of South Asian descent, explores how drag has been a disidentificatory practice for him, allowing him transform cultural products from the United States and South Asia for the purpose of performances that can resist homophobia, Empire, and the forces of the War on Terror. Both Muñoz and Khubchandani can be used to further develop with students the concept of “terrorist drag” that Muñoz offers to his readers.