

A Queer Situation: Drag as both a Colonial and an Emancipatory Force

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Introduction:

The practice of dressing and performing in drag first emerged in Europe as early as the thirteenth century when prepubescent male actors portrayed female characters in theatrical productions (Baker 1994). Today, drag has become a worldwide phenomenon thanks in part to television programs like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Dragula*, which rely on competition and reality television formats to reel viewers in (Schottmiller 2017). However, as observing and performing drag gains popularity, performers and audience members should begin to more closely examine the ways in which drag may reinforce the “colonial matrix of power” over gender, racial, and linguistic identities, as well as the ways in which it may serve as an emancipatory force (Mignolo 1995). By examining these problematic areas, I hope to aid drag performers and audience members in identifying and combating expressions of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities within the drag community.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how the United States' colonial legacy and drag's multicultural nature interact within modern American social and cultural landscapes. Over the course of this paper, I examine whether or not common forms of gender expression, language and vocabulary, and style of dress within the United States' drag community constitute hegemonic or hybrid masculine behaviors. Much of the material cited in this paper was generated by scholars in the fields of feminist, gender, and queer studies and is qualitative. In addition, many of the scholars cited in this paper agree that the vast majority of drag, by nature,

undermines heteronormative, colonial, and patriarchal institutions; however, they often disagree about the manner and extent to which drag challenges these systems of oppression.

Hegemonic and Hybrid Masculinities:

Leading sociologist RL Connell first devised the concept of hegemonic masculinity in 1982 in order to describe the way in which men rely on pre-existing patriarchal power dynamics to maintain their hierarchical power over other members of society and reinforce a gender binary that “legitimizes male violence” (Connell 1997; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is typically indicated through surface characteristics (such as physical fitness and white status), heterosexuality-linked behaviors, elevated social class, and, of course, the male gender identity (Barry & Wiener 2017). As a consequence of colonization, hegemonic masculine behaviors are reinforced and perpetuated through hetero-colonial systems that further condition individuals to behave in this manner (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

In contrast, the concept of hybrid masculinity describes instances when privileged men co-opt the style or aesthetics of a marginalized subculture in order to gain social currency or to (falsely) claim allyship status to a marginalized group (Bridges 2014). This form of appropriation allows privileged men to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinities without deconstructing the systems that grant them their privilege, reinforces the notion that marginalized groups are socially inferior, and strengthens existing social boundaries between groups (Whitmer 2017). This concept has previously been used to analyze diverse aspects of American society; however, it has been infrequently applied to the drag community.

Gender:

As a general rule of thumb, drag performances, whether they are the product of drag queens or drag kings, tend to exaggerate traditional gender stereotypes for comedic effect. Some

feminist scholars argue that the hypermasculine performances of drag kings, which typically valorize traditional masculine traits and objectify women, reinforce hegemonic masculinities because they romanticize masculine violence and reinforce patriarchal norms (Basiliere 2019). Similarly, some scholars assert that drag queens' hypersexualized performances perpetuate traditional western gender stereotypes, reinforce colonial gender binaries, and glorify systems of heteropatriarchy (Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro 2010).

In contrast, a much larger group of scholars asserts that drag challenges the colonial and patriarchal systems that promote hegemonic masculinity. One way in which drag artists repudiate hegemonic masculinity and destabilize euro-centric conceptions of gender is by embracing gender non-conformity and androgyny during drag performances and events (Rupp Taylor & Shapiro 2010). Gender is a social construct that is inherently "performative," i.e., defined through a set of adopted traits that are reinforced through public expressions that adhere to an established idea of what constitutes gender-appropriate behavior. However, by greatly exaggerating gender-appropriate behavior, drag performers undermine euro-centric conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality and satirize social behaviors that conform to the European gender binary (Moloney and Fenstermaker, 2002).

Language:

American drag queens are typically known for their lively style of speaking that combines the jargon and tone of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with the syntax of White Women's English (WWE), reflecting drag's multicultural heritage (Barrett 1994). During a drag show, performers often deliberately exaggerate certain linguistic traits in each language in order to highlight, critique, and challenge gendered styles of speech (Mann 2011). Moreover, over the course of a performance, drag kings and queens may alternate between

WWE and AAVE in order to highlight the societal inequalities within the United States that contribute to these discrepancies (Barrett 1994).

While non-white performers' use of WWE is widely accepted, the use of AAVE by non-black drag performers is a more contentious subject. It is difficult to differentiate between AAVE and the social dialect used by American drag queens, which is heavily influenced by the former; nevertheless, many linguists have persuasively argued that when non-black individuals use AAVE as a means to gain social recognition, they do so at the expense of Black people and culture (Bucholtz 1999). This practice constitutes an instance of hybrid masculine behavior because it allows non-black individuals to gain social standing while simultaneously distancing themselves from any systems of oppression from which they may benefit. Shaikjee expands upon this point, arguing that when white performers deliberately choose to replicate this style of speaking, they reinforce orientalist narratives by embarking on a "fetishistic escape that transcends the rigidity of their own whiteness" through linguistic mimicry (Shaikjee 2017).

Race:

When discussing the relationship between race and drag, it is important to acknowledge the role that colonialism and orientalism play in sexualizing race and racializing sexuality (Gunkel 2010). In their interviews with the drag troupe House of D'bus, Jack S. Kahn, Lynsey Goddard, and Jamie M. Coy determined that queens of color often felt that the characters that they could portray while in drag were severely restricted by "racial and culture-specific narratives that...construct[ed] masculinity as [something] determined by a racialized body" (Kahn, Goddard, & Coy 2013). Essentially, drag performers felt that audience members expected queens to adhere to racialized narratives that equate certain socio-cultural behaviors with a performer's ethnic background. As a result, queens of color felt that they had to embody these

cultural stereotypes in order to retain their audience's attention (Bauman 2001; Kahn, Goddard, & Coy 2013).

This phenomenon constitutes an instance of hegemonic masculine behavior because it fetishizes racial minorities and gender non-conforming individuals and reinforces social divides between groups, i.e., performers and audience members. Performers' adherence to these stereotypes is also an issue of concern because they may unintentionally internalize and replicate these narratives within their own subculture. In addition, by setting this precedent, performers may create conditions that force other members of the drag community to constantly negotiate their masculinity within both hegemonic and secondary cultures (Shaikjee 2017).

However, other scholars argue that drag performances have the potential to resist and reindex cultural stereotypes of sexual and racial identities by generating conversation about these issues. Dr. Jana. E. Braziel has persuasively argued that when drag parodies stereotypes of Black masculinity derived from American pop cultural mediums, these stereotypes are restyled and performed in a manner that destabilizes them (Braziel 2005). By reclaiming or parodying cultural stereotypes in their performances, drag kings challenge the social-cultural "desiring machines" that eroticize non-white masculinities and femininities and encourage hegemonic masculine behaviors (Braziel 2005; Johnson 2003). In addition, Braziel also asserts that drag performances can serve as "sites of cross-cultural appropriation that provide fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and other," indicating that cultural interactions and exchanges between members of the drag community can help bridge divides between social and ethnic sub-cultures and even produce an entirely new (queer) subculture.

Conclusion:

The medium of drag has a long and celebrated history of multiculturalism and inclusivity, which often manifests itself through performances designed to challenge mainstream American notions of gender and race. Drag is resistant to hegemonic masculinities because it rejects the gender binary in favor of the gender spectrum, strategically mixes AAVE and WWE to identify and critique structural inequality, and parodies racial stereotypes to rebuke the exotification of race by colonial society. However, despite its power to decolonize the mind, drag is still subject to influence by the dominant culture which encourages appropriation of other subcultures. Therefore, performers must walk a very fine line in order to avoid unintentionally engaging in hybrid masculine behavior or retrenching racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes.

This text aims to address performers behavior in drag bars and other queer spaces and, therefore, does not account for performers' hegemonic and hybrid masculine behaviors on social media, personal websites, and entertainment programs. In addition, the majority of the research cited in this literary review was conducted in the United States and, therefore, reflects many American cultural biases. Nevertheless, many of the issues raised and arguments presented by this paper are applicable to other post-colonial societies. Ultimately, as drag becomes more of a mainstream practice, researchers, performers, and audience members will have to closely examine the ways in which members of the drag community engage in hegemonic or hybrid masculine behaviors and work to combat this issue.

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