QUEENING THE INTERSECTION: USING DRAG RHETORIC AND INTERSECTIONAL THEORY IN CRITICAL COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate College of Texas State University - San Marcos in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Master in Rhetoric and Composition May 2017

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my friends, Shaun, Rachel, and Kayte, as well as my mentor/advisor, Nancy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for agreeing to help me with this thesis. Shaun Bryan and Nancy Wilson were the people who convinced me that I would do well in the Master’s in Rhetoric and Composition program that I am finishing and that this program would welcome the application of drag to this field. Deborah Balzhiser, both as a boss and an instructor, always provided clear and helpful feedback for all of my work that she has seen and she has always been supportive of my ideas, regardless of how “out there” they seemed. Since I am not in a Women’s and Gender Studies program, yet my focus is on drag and gender performance, Audrey McKinney has provided an essential perspective on my research interest that I could not have received from anyone else. Last, but not least, I owe a complete debt of gratitude to my mentor, professor, supervisor, friend, and thesis director, Nancy Wilson. Dr. Wilson has nurtured my idea of writing this thesis since before I began my master’s program, which made it go without saying that she would direct it. Throughout my two thesis semesters, Dr. Wilson consistently met with me on a weekly basis, provided excellent feedback for every step in this grueling process even though she has various other commitments, and has given me nothing but encouragement and helpful guidance. This thesis would not be what it is without her. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their love, encouragement, and material that gave my drag persona, Agony Myers, some life. Even though my mother, Mary Hagemaster, never quite understood me or the academic work I have done, she has
always been supportive of my life choices and has been a model for the “woman” that Agony is. My long-time friend and drag sister, Terror Krueger, was a companion throughout my teen years who experienced the same sense of isolation and awkwardness as me when we discovered our queer sexualities and interests in drag at about the same time. Seeing as how so many queer teens experience these things alone, I now realize how fortunate I was to have her in my life during that time. We now encourage each other’s creative pursuits, and as a professional makeup artist and drag performer, she is always willing to give me drag tips that she wouldn’t give to anyone else. Then there’s Shaun, a person who has served multiple roles in my life as a friend, boss, mentor, and roommate. He was the first person to mention the possibility of focusing on drag rhetoric in my master’s program, he has been a role model for success and working hard as my only friend who, like me, is also queer and with Asperger’s, and comes from a working-class background. From sharing similar life experiences and academic interests, Shaun has provided professional and academic support in a way that nobody else could have and I probably would not have pursued a post bachelorette degree without the example he has set for me.
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1. PREFACE

Something I learned at a very young age was that getting dressed meant a lot more than merely putting clothes on my back. Since before my parents divorced when I was four, my mother always made a big deal about dressing up for church. Her emphasis on appearance is so ingrained into my vague memory of being that age to the point that I can’t imagine how she looked without makeup and her long, black, wavy hair snatched back into a half-ponytail with eyebrow-length waterfall bangs during that time. I recall that my father often wore a tweed blazer with elbow patches and a tie, my sister in a floral dress with a puffy skirt and sleeves, and my older brother and I often dressed similarly even though we looked nothing alike. He came out looking somewhat Asian (or “chinito” as my mother calls it, which basically means Chinese, but is used to amalgamate all Asian features) with olive skin, jet-black hair, and slightly slanted eyes even though we are both half Chicanx and white. I, on the other hand, just looked like a sickly white kid because I was always bony and pale with dark, sleepy-looking eyes. Since my dad was a fan of country and often sported a vest, cowboy hat, and cowboy boots when he wasn’t going to church, my mother typically stuck my brother and I into mini versions of my dad’s wardrobe, if not something dressier, like a suit.

As I grew older, I couldn’t really understand why, but I started to develop a discomfort with all this dolling up. The immediate cause of the discomfort was from my mom’s verbal marveling at how handsome I looked whenever I was dressed up, which is something I quickly became aware of and started resisting once I was old enough to dress myself. Looking back, I think the underlying reason for this discomfort and eventual
resistance had to do with the feeling of being feminized because even though dressing up for church involved wearing “gender-appropriate” clothes for a boy, the idea of dressing up indicated an attention to how I looked, as well as a compliance with how to look “proper.” My mother’s attention to how I looked made me embarrassed not only for being made a spectacle for how I looked, as I’m sure most little girls are at much younger ages, but also because showing that I wanted to look proper, or even that I’ll just wear anything that my mother lays out for me without much thought, like a lot of young boys and even husbands, was unacceptable to me. Therefore, this resistance to dress up became an ongoing battle between my mother and me well into middle school.

Aside from my public middle school uniform, I encountered a lot of mixed rhetoric about dressing up. When students got into trouble for something a little more serious than something that can be addressed with after school detention, they would be sentenced to In School Suspension (ISS) for a few days, and if they wouldn’t shape up from that or get into bigger trouble, they would be placed into Alternative. In a way, Alternative was the prison to ISS’s jail because it involved more serious violations and lasted for several weeks, if not an entire semester or school year. When students were placed into this isolated and more restricted class at my middle school, they were obligated to wear plain white dress shirts and black ties instead of their uniforms, as well as have their version of P.E. in those clothes while everyone else was having lunch and reeses as a way of humiliating them and setting an example to the rest of us. This assertion of dominance that my middle school used with clothing as a form of punishment confirmed my perception about dressing up as being a form of compliance;
however, when I took a speech class in seventh grade, the visual rhetoric of showing that you care about how you look was also emphasized.

My speech teacher, who often looked dapper himself, liked having mock trials in class for a unit, where he would get permission to have us come to school in attire that was appropriate for the courtroom as a way of teaching us that dressing professional was an important aspect of being professional. Of course, as an emerging goth kid and someone who had been fighting with my mom over similar issues, I resisted this attempt to be professionalized by showing up to trial in my basic school uniform t-shirt; a ratted black hoodie with thumbholes that I made myself; scraggly, dyed hair that covered my face; dirty Chuck Taylors with holes in them; and uniform khakis that were torn up and filthy at the bottom from dragging my feet. I reveled at my speech teacher’s disapproval, which was completely counter to my mother’s adoration from when I dressed nice. I managed to subvert dressing up in speech class by choosing to wear my basic uniform with gothic accoutrements, while everyone else dressed to impress, and I also managed to avoid getting into serious enough trouble that would have resulted in me wearing a shirt and tie to school, which was a strategy that empowered me to be transgressive based on my appearance without giving authority figures any actual reason to punish me since I was generally a good student.

Until recently, I have only considered the androgyny of being goth as my gateway into drag because after all, I learned how to walk in heels from wearing platform boots and developed a curiosity for makeup when I idolized the visual spectacle of Marilyn Manson’s fashion choices, but I eventually realized that this subversive resistance as an adolescent was also very drag. I was socialized into learning how clothes are capable of
conveying certain messages and responses, which relates to drag because it emphasizes a fetishization of outfits and overall looks, as well as a resistance of normative control. This fetishization that I’m referring to is not to be confused with a sexual arousal from certain pieces of clothing, which falls into the category of transvestic fetishism, but an obsession with using clothes and styling to convey complete concepts. Since drag involves performing fully realized characters with a demonstrated attention to the nuances of identity enactment, instead of merely wearing gendered pieces of clothing for cheap thrills, drag is a fetish that emphasizes the cultural importance of keeping up appearances to the point that illusiveness is next to godliness, while authenticity should be distorted. Part of drag rhetoric’s subversively transgressive appeal seems to come from how it manages to agitate normative expectations of self-presentation because it involves “inflicting” feminization and, in certain contexts, humiliation onto one’s own body, which resists any exterior control since getting dressed is such a personal endeavor. Therefore, drag rhetoric approaches the issue of “if clothing is just clothing, then why is my doing drag so contentious?”

Similar to the experiences I highlight above, Queening the Intersection: Using Drag Rhetoric and Intersectional Theory in Critical Composition Pedagogy is my attempt to answer the question “what has drag done for me lately?” (thank you, Janet Jackson) for a broader audience because even though not many people grow up to be drag queens, academics, or a combination of the two, the powerful subversion in drag rhetoric is a useful quality to learn. In a political climate where the academic and queer communities are facing conservative backlashes from the 2016 presidential election, state universities are being threatened with defunding and every kind of oppression is being
defended. Thus, the subversively transgressive rhetoric that drag queens put out can model methods of resistance and survival that have succeeded in historical eras of oppression, then these methods can be taught and applied to current and future oppressive regimes.
2. INTRODUCTION TO DRAG AND CRITICAL COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

Statement of the Problem

Critical pedagogy, as Paulo Freire theorizes, liberates students to be autonomous thinkers, instead of passive consumers, of messages that are directed at them. When this principle is applied to composition pedagogy, the result is critical composition pedagogy, a conscientious effort to replace the banking model of depositing information into students with an interactive model that encourages thinking, reading, and writing that is critical of the status quo.

To master this higher level of thinking, composition students need to learn how to trouble certain binaries that they may have passively accepted as inherent in their experiences. One of the most difficult-to-deconstruct of these is the male/female binary. Fortunately, drag performance is one of the few artistic media in popular American culture that isn’t afraid to trouble the politics of gender identity in the rhetoric that it produces. Moreover, drag performance (e.g. costuming and lipsyncing) exposes both intentional and unintentional rhetoric by a co-culture that continues to be oppressed, decentering the status quo.

As Rachel Groner and John F. O’Hara argue, gender is a topic that will help writing students practice and refine their “critical reading, thinking, and writing skills” because gender is something that is familiar, relevant, political and personal—a “discourse” that is the subject of ongoing academic conversations, and a foundation for identity (2-4). Groner and O’Hara highlight that as participants of culture and society, we are already “experts” of gender due to socialization, and since writing instruction
typically involves strengthening students’ critical skills, giving them the access to re-
think something that they consider to be so inherent and foundational to their own
identities, as gender is, is an effective starting point for composition instruction as well.
When Groner and O’Hara’s argument is looked at through Judith Butler’s theory of
performativity, an assertion that “gender is not a noun,” but rather something that “is
always a doing” because it is “performed” in a way that is “produced and compelled by
the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (34), gender can be seen as a rhetorical
discourse.

In this thesis, I will analyze how the subversive articulations of particular realities
of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, ability, etc. inherent in queening (male-to-female
drag performance) can provide a unique critical composition pedagogy. By pulling from
critical pedagogy, composition theory, queer theory, feminist theory (performance, art,
border theory, performativity, etc.), I will attempt to move this theorizing towards an
actual praxis of drag pedagogy.

**Research Questions**

I am interested in expanding Freire-inspired critical pedagogy, as well as
composition theories, to include the critical elements of drag rhetoric and scholarship. My
key research questions include . . .

- What theoretical framework or frameworks would best capture the usefulness of
drag composition pedagogy?

To address this overarching question, I will consider the following:
• How can the analogous relationship between drag culture and critical composition pedagogy scholarship inform a new framework for writing instruction?

• Why would a new pedagogy that is based on the performance of gender and sexuality have liberatory qualities for writing students?

Limitations

The primary limitation of this research project is the fact that even though my use of scholarship and lore from classes I have taught could provide theoretical answers to my research questions, I do not provide any empirical data to support the conclusions I reach.

Thesis Chapter Outline

Chapter Two: In order to fit drag into a composition pedagogy context, I first contextualize queening performance as a rhetorical medium that is used to communicate complex messages about culture and identity, and specifically gender. I will argue that since hegemonic gender conventions are typically used to oppress those who fall lower in the hierarchy, drag performance is a physical act of rhetorical embodiment that utilizes gendered symbolism to subversively transgress scripts of normative identity enactments. Therefore, I focus on three drag rhetors--Julian Eltinge (1881-1941), Divine (1945-1988), and Evita Bezuidenhout (1945--)--who not only demonstrate a cultural evolution of drag’s media-based influence on how certain identities can be performed over the twentieth century, but also represent key elements of drag that include queer embodiment, political subversion, and monstrous transgression before queening was popularized by the
competition reality show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. I chose to focus on these specific drag queens because each of them rhetorically undermine hegemonic conventions of identity performance in their own ways.

Since the gendered elements in drag performance are often exaggerated, sometimes for mere comedic effect, other times to make cultural assumptions that are typically nuanced more apparent, drag traditionally fits into the camp mediasphere because it transgresses cultural norms while subverting its messages with satire. In their book, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner claim that “with respect to camp, in particular, many scholars have noted that it is frequently—if not always—anchored in conventional notions or ‘discourses’ of gender and sexuality, and accordingly, their questions circulate around whether and, if so, how camp may function as a key strategy by which those discourses might be renegotiated” because camp’s prominence in contemporary pop culture appears to make political statements that go against “dominant media interests” that are “invested in preserving conventional discourse... and defus[ing] potentially threatening strategies and sensibilities” (2). Drag and other kinds of camp performances are able to execute such transgressive statements through gendered messages because

Gender and sexuality are key axes on which camp has turned historically, especially as available in gay male and cross dressing cultures and epitomized in “drag.” In large part, this has led a host of scholars to suggest that camp performances that draw on this legacy are inherently subversive, insofar as they challenge conventional sensibilities regarding gender and sexuality. As such, cross-sex performances would likely be
relatively less available in mainstream popular culture and media fare.

(Shugart and Waggoner 4-5)

Therefore, drag performance, as a part of camp media, is intended to indicate a level of self-awareness about its over-the-top depiction of gender as a subversive transgression against mainstream media fare. Beyond just the queering of mainstream media fare, drag rhetoric also troubles the notion that social constructs of masculinity and femininity are exclusively bound to male and female sexes, which not only carry cisnormative assumptions about how gender is embodied and performed, but also challenges the notion that any real life person can be entirely masculine or feminine in a conventional sense. Queening rhetoric challenges these normative gender ideologies by combining masculine and feminine elements in their performances either by providing an overtly comical juxtaposition of gender or depicting gender fluidity, which often blends differently gendered elements.

With gender and sexuality being key axes of camp performance, Shugart and Waggoner write that the performance of femininity is foundational for performing camp because “conventional discourses of femininity and contemporary sensibilities overlap in interesting ways as relevant to the artifice and excess that are understood to characterize both” (5). Therefore, Shugart and Waggoner’s discussion about drag indicates that the camp value in drag performance is a specific form of rhetorical femininity that queers normative perceptions of gender and femininity. The performance of femininity that these authors focus on is of women performing hyperfemininity as it exists within camp media, which can be thought of as female-to-female drag; however, since performances of over-the-top femininity appear to be such a subversive articulation of gender expression in
cultures that prioritize masculinity, male-to-female drag seems to fit into a similar category of feminine camp as female-to-female drag.

Shugart and Waggoner also make the case that camp performances, which include drag performances, are rhetorical. By identifying a presumable rhetorical purpose for camp performances, these authors “identify a discursive logic that... characterizes ‘resistive’ contemporary camp performance--a logic distinguished by specific, predictable premises that invite a reading of those performances as subversive, even as the movement of that logic functions in novel ways that reflect the environment in which they occur” (Shugart and Waggoner 6-7). Shugart and Waggoner claim that camp performance is appropriative; however, these authors do not single out drag from any other gender performance associated with camp as an appropriation of gender, but instead argue that part of camp’s rhetorical purpose is to appropriate the mainstream mediascape. Shugart and Waggoner contend that “camp itself constitutes an appropriation of contemporary media aesthetics, practices, and tactics, even as they might have been and continue to be appropriated in contemporary media fare” (10). This linkage between drag media and camp relates to Muñoz’s, and Butler’s contentions that drag’s articulation of gender is not a direct iteration of gender that exists outside of the medium, but a rhetorical allusion to how gender is perceived. However, since Shugart and Waggoner primarily focus on the performance of gender and sexuality as expressed in camp media, drag only serves as just another example of camp rhetoric. Therefore, in order for drag rhetoric to be fully conceptualized, it needs to be the primary focus of rhetorical scholarship instead of just an example of queer, gender, or camp media.
Since the above scholarship primarily uses drag as an example to explain concepts related to heteronormative gender appropriations and deviations, disidentifactory expressions in queer art, and in camp depictions of gender and sexuality, a lack of primary focus on drag rhetoric highlights an apparent gap in research in this area. By focusing on three of the most widely known drag queens in their respective eras and locations, I will be able to begin developing a theoretical model of drag as a tool of deconstruction because it uses subversive rhetoric to highlight problematic things in culture that are usually overlooked.

Chapter Three: After being on the air since 2009, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* has brought drag into the mainstream, which has contributed to a limited perception of queening to an aesthetic that reflects RuPaul’s. Therefore, since this competition reality show influenced a particular drag aesthetic with underlying implications that there are “right” and “wrong” forms of drag, it left room for drag queens to break these rules, which shows an intrinsic subversiveness and transgressiveness to the point that it even subverts standard forms of queening. Even though this project is not entirely set around *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, I will narrow my focus on drag as it exists within the queening context, instead of kinging (female-to-male drag) or even female-to-female drag, for the scope of this project because the television show, which only features drag queens, contributes a great deal to how drag is understood and discussed by contemporary audiences. I will apply the framework from the previous chapter, as well as intersectional theories, to contemporary drag performances. I plan to accomplish this by focusing on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season eight contestant Thorgy Thor’s Michael Jackson, boy drag impersonation because it showcases gendered, racial, and sexual incongruities of Jackson’s persona, as well as
demonstrates a change in *RPDR*’s standards for queening since Thor’s performance was validated as acceptable drag for the show when similar performances on earlier seasons were discouraged. Another form of drag that was discouraged from earlier seasons of the competition reality show, then later marginally accepted that I’m also going to discuss in this chapter is bearded/genderfuck queening because it overtly confronts the incongruous concepts that deem bearded women freakish since it is not only accepted, but preferable for men to be hairy, while hairy women are demonized and fetished.

As Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sumi Cho, and Leslie McCall claim in their article, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” people with several intersections of oppressed identities experience life sometimes through discrimination and sometimes through benefits because “intersectionality is inextricably linked to an analysis of power [because it] is not exclusively or even primarily preoccupied with categories, identities, and subjectivities[;] rather, the intersectional analysis... emphasizes political and structural inequalities” because it is the exterior privileging of certain identities over others that makes intersectionality such a complex topic (797). Therefore, these authors argue that “intersectionality helps reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories” (797). However, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall also note that a “challenge to intersectionality is its alleged emphasis on categories of identity versus structures of inequality[, as well as its] supposed reifications of categories [that] often reflect distorted understandings of identity politics [because] attentiveness to identity, if simultaneously confronting power, need not be interpreted so narrowly” (797). Specifically, other theorists have challenged Crenshaw’s initial theorizing of
intersectionality for being a sociocultural theory that appears to focus on identity
categories for individuals instead of the societal structure that constructed such
hierarchies of cultural identity.

Additionally, when an element of camp and irony are applied to drag’s version of
passing, drag performances become what Jose Esteban Muñoz coins as “disidentifying”
defines disidentification as something that “is meant to be descriptive of the survival
strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public
sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform
to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). This explains why seeing a drag
remediation of heterosexual performer-audience interaction as camp can be thought of as
an example of disidentification because it would be similar to “passing” in queer culture,
but instead of creating a believable performance as in “passing,” Muñoz claims that drag
performers and similar subjects who pass “can be simultaneously identifying with and
rejecting a dominant form” (108). Disidentification relates to intersectional theory
because most of the subjects that Muñoz focuses on are not only queer, but nonwhite
because his theory centers around the survival strategies that queer people who embody
several different marginalized identities use to operate within a predominantly white,
heteronormative society.

Similar to Butler, Muñoz argues that drag performance is its own articulation of
gender by stating that “in traditional male-to-female drag, ‘woman’ is performed, but one
would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a
performance, no matter how ‘real,’ as an actual performance of ‘woman’” (108). Muñoz
explains that “femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women” (108), which is how drag queens are able to illustrate their own version of femininity that does not explicitly indicate that they are performing as cisgendered “woman.” Therefore, Muñoz differentiates his theory from Butler’s by connecting drag’s version of femininity to disidentification because drag not only depicts an articulation of an “ideal woman,” but also provides queer commentary about the heteronormative a priori association between woman and femininity at the same time. This challenge towards “universalizing rhetorics of femininity” that Muñoz describes shows how drag rhetoric has the potential to trouble assumptions that any real-life person can be exclusively masculine or feminine and/or that these characteristics are bound to a compatible gender that is assigned. A limitation to Muñoz’s theory, however, is the fact that he focuses primarily on queer art forms that indicate disidentificatory messages with drag as one of his many examples. Unlike the theorists who have been cited above, I intend to primarily focus on drag as a rhetorical discourse.

Review of Literature

Theorizing Drag as Rhetoric

In Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, she contends that there might not be a “true gender,” which contradicts the notion that drag appropriates gender because her argument insists that gender isn’t as serious or substantial of a discourse that can be appropriated. Butler theorizes that “if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary
and stable identity,” (186) which shows how drag subverts conceptions of gender through camp and mockery because the aesthetic of drag appearances and performances creates a tangibly self-aware version of gendered fantasies. Butler continues by stating that

As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctions of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the godiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (187)

Therefore, with the notion of gender performativity in mind, Butler argues that the parodic nature of drag is a response to the cultural assertion that an original entity exists to imitate. Drag style has thus developed its own aesthetic that communicates “drag” and not “woman;” that there is no one clear-cut way of “doing” woman. Even though drag involves parody and mockery, it is not necessarily at woman’s expense, but at the expense of the structures that bound the superficial performance of femininity to “woman.” Even though Butler’s argument about drag’s aesthetic serving as more of an allusion to the idea of “woman” than a direct imitation of woman is accurate, the foundation of her argument only serves as one of many examples for “troubling gender,” which implies that drag rhetoric, along with any other articulation of gender, is merely an artificial performance. Therefore, Butler’s contention is apt to the extent that gender is
performative to a certain extent; however, her theory of performativity overlooks the possibility that articulations of gender, along with drag rhetoric, involves an aspect of gendered embodiment as well.

**Marjorie Garber**, in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, challenges the association between femininity and artificiality, then goes a step further by addressing the belief that maleness is inherent via her analysis about the impersonation of male celebrities. Similar to Butler, Garber argues that transvestic articulations of gender aren’t direct representations of gender in the way that it has been recognized within constructed gender binaries by writing that “the power of the transvestite as that spectral other who exists only in representation--not a representation of male or female, but of, precisely, itself: its own phantom or ghost” (373). That is, drag’s transgressive nature is its own gendered medium and is meant to expose the figurative aspect of performing a gender. Garber remarks on the idea of woman and femininity being considered artificial, while male is typically perceived as inherent by stating that “the argument from ‘masquerade’ tries to establish ‘woman’ as artificial, gestural, a theatrical creature who can be taken apart and put back together. But what has become clearer is that ‘man’--the male person--is at least as artificial as ‘woman’” (373-4). Therefore, beyond Butler’s theory that a “true gender” doesn’t exist because any aspect of gender only exists as a performance, Garber argues that the gendered body is not a stable “ground” that can be rhetorically manipulated, but something that is more “figurative,” fluid, and malleable. She states that “the fashion garment of the drag queen signifies the absent or phantom body” because the body being refashioned here implies that there is “no body, and nobody, the clothes without the Emperor” (Garber 374). Garber then directly goes against
what many literary and cultural scholars have argued that gender only exists in representations and repeated iterations and concluding that “the subversive secret of transvestism [is] that the body is not the ground, but the figure” because it is basically just another object that cultures assign particular meanings to (374). In a sense, Garber is implying that not only drag, but gender in and of itself, is rhetorical. However, Garber’s assessment is not a popular one. Even though Garber’s theory does not overlook the body, which is a major limitation found in Butler’s performativity, Garber’s emphasis is on the act of transvestism, which serves as an all-encompassing umbrella for drag, transvestic fetishism, transgenderism, and gender impersonation. Therefore, Garber’s all-encompassing emphasis on different versions of gender nonconformity appears to ignore the distinguishing nuances that each of these examples, namely drag rhetoric, embody.

Unlike Butler and Garber, Alison Shaw and Shirley Ardener examine drag performance in a Canadian gay bar, which places drag performance in a queer context, as opposed to a generally heterosexual one in their book, Changing Sex and Bending Gender; however, these researchers also seem to impose homonormative, cisgendered male assumptions about the drag queens they study, as well as in their assertions about drag performance in general. These researchers make the case that the flirtation between drag performers and male audience members is a subversive representation of male homosexual relations by arguing that some of the performers in their study “spoke of drag as a way in which they could express sexual attraction to men more openly than gay men are normally allowed to in Canadian culture” because even in gay spaces, displaying affection or desire towards people of the same sex is still considered unacceptable (Shaw and Ardener 109). Thus, Shaw and Ardener argue that “the actions in drag shows thus
define masculinity in terms of sexuality” because according to social standards of “passing” in public settings “only someone who ‘looks female’ is allowed to perform [, or at least in this case, allude to engaging in] sexual acts with ‘men’” (109). Therefore, with the exaggerated allusion to “male-oriented heterosexual performance, with the drag queens flirting with and kissing male audience members as female nightclub artists do, and the audience stuffing tips down the performers’ garter belts or bras, like the audience at a strip show,” Shaw and Ardener find grounds to conclude that drag performance reifies the heteronormative belief that men (if they want to appear masculine) can only behave sexually toward women or those who “resemble” women (109). By performing in a community that typically values homonormativity and with an extensive history of members either “passing” and/or remaining “in the closet” as social survival strategies, the subversive allusion to heterosexual flirtation in drag performance that these researchers examine appears to be apt to a certain extent. Shaw and Ardener’s argument about drag’s subversive articulation of sexuality appears to rhetoricize the performance of sexuality, similar to how Butler and Garber imply that drag rhetoricizes gender, because the drag queens that these researchers studied do drag to express a repressed sexual message; however, if Shaw and Ardener’s findings are looked at as performances of camp, the expressed allusions to heterosexual flirtation in drag performance can be thought of as even more subversive than intended because the queer performers and audience members might have been mocking heteronormative performer-audience interactions.

When an element of camp and irony are applied to drag’s version of passing, drag performances become what is referred to as what Jose Esteban Muñoz coins as
“disidentifying” in his book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Muñoz defines disidentification as something that “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). This explains why seeing a drag remediation of heterosexual performer-audience interaction as camp can be thought of as an example of disidentification because it would technically qualify as a form of passing, as Shaw and Ardener argue, but it would not be a reification of heteronormativity because Muñoz claims that drag performers and similar subjects who pass “can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form” (108).

Similar to Butler and Garber, Muñoz argues that drag performance is its own articulation of gender by stating that “in traditional male-to-female drag, ‘woman’ is performed, but one would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how ‘real,’ as an actual performance of ‘woman’” (108). Muñoz explains that “femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women” (108), which is how drag queens are able to illustrate their own version of femininity that does not explicitly indicate that they are performing as cisgendered “woman,” as Butler and Garber imply. Therefore, Muñoz differentiates his theory from Butler’s and Garber’s by connecting drag’s version of femininity to disidentification because drag not only depicts an articulation of an “ideal woman,” but also provides queer commentary about the heteronormative a priori association between woman and femininity at the same time. This challenge towards “universalizing rhetorics of femininity” that Muñoz describes shows how drag rhetoric has the potential to trouble assumptions that any real-life person
can be exclusively masculine or feminine and/or that these characteristics are bound to a compatible gender that is assigned. A limitation to Muñoz’s theory, however, is the fact that he focuses primarily on queer art forms that indicate disidentificatory messages with drag as one of his many examples. Therefore, unlike the theorists who have been cited above, I intend to primarily focus on drag as a rhetorical discourse.

Now that a foundation for drag, as well as articulations of gender, as a form of composition and not something that is entirely inherent has been established, it can be argued that drag is a rhetorical medium that communicates certain iterations of gender. In *Rhetorical Drag*, Lorrayne Carroll outlines one of the first implications that drag is rhetorical, and even links it to writing, which she refers to as the “tricky” practice of “authorial gender impersonation” (1). For example, in several early American captivity narratives—*The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, *Ornaments for Daughters of Zion*, *Humiliations Follow’d with Deliverances*, etc.—where male writers assume the voice of female protagonists as captives. Carroll characterizes this form of drag as something rhetorical by explaining that it “encompasses an array of discursive practices that reflect and inflect contemporaneous gender regimes [and] exceeds merely the appropriations of the ‘I’ and depends for its success on ascriptions of gendered language and diverse rhetorical practices” (1). She further asserts that “this fabrication involves rhetorical choices about diction, direct and indirect discourse, interpolated texts, and (self) characterization, among other stylistic elements” (Carroll 3). Carroll classifies the iterations of gender that are depicted in these captive narratives as appropriations, a term that is often used to scrutinize drag culture and performance specifically because “each of the captivity narratives demonstrates what a female experience should sound or look like,
each produces an explicitly gendered style; each performs gender” by showing typical male perceptions “of what is meant to be female at the time of the texts’ publication” (3). Although the specific authors that Carroll addresses may not have been a part of any particular marginalized community, her heteronormative definition of *rhetorical drag* as a mere appropriation of the female voice seems to overlook legitimate non-cisgendered identities or expressions. What Carroll does not seem to acknowledge that Muñoz does is that most drag performers are themselves marginalized individuals with queer gender and sexual identities, and it is also probable that they belong to other marginalized communities. Therefore, Carroll’s derogatory use of *rhetorical drag* appears to carry appropriative implications of drag rhetoric.

Even though Carroll argues that the narratives she examines are examples of drag, the appropriative aspect of these texts appears to resemble something along the lines of “rhetorical female impersonation” because it seems as though these male authors wanted their constructed “femaleness” to be believable “femaleness” to their intended audiences, while drag often involves elements of camp that make their “mis” or “re-gendering” performances apparent. Regardless of a given drag genre, whether a drag queen’s style is rooted in achieving a level of female “believability” in the overtly feminine context of drag beauty pageantry or in a way that directly confronts gendered and sexual norms that are prescribed by heteronormative cis-gendering, the articulation of drag is rooted in camp.

*Drag Rhetoric’s Collection of Intersections*
Since drag both involves and combines various identity categories in a disidentifactory manner, drag rhetoric alludes to a new intersectional category of cultural identification. Based on what scholars have argued about drag not being merely an iteration of some preconceived gender category, but something that establishes its own gender category, it can be argued that drag’s remediation of gender and sexuality also includes various intersections of identity (such as non-cisgendered gender categories, non-homosexual queer sexualities, race, class, ethnicity, age, ability, etc.) that show the complexities involved with how gender and sexuality are understood and articulated. Therefore, intersectional theory, which acknowledges the various benefits and oppressions that people with multiple cultural identities possess, is important to consider for drag rhetoric, especially when contextualizing drag’s appropriative tendencies.

With her intersectional theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw is one of the first scholars to directly address the complexity of having several marginalized identities in her essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” Crenshaw argues that a problem with identity politics “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” This overlooking of differences “within groups contributes to tensions among groups” such as feminist efforts that have attempted “to politicize experiences of people of color,” proceeding as though the issues and experiences that were detailed for white women occurred on mutually exclusive terrains for women of color (1242). When people attempt to address both men’s battering and raping of women, Crenshaw notes “how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243). Unfortunately, these experiences “tend not to be represented within the discourses of
either feminism or antiracism” because the intersectional identity that encompasses both “women” and “of color” are often overlooked within discourses that are shaped to respond to only one issue or the other (Crenshaw 1243). Since the factors that Crenshaw attempts to address in her theory also include class and sexuality, her initial “focus on intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Moreover, as Crenshaw explains, “a large and continuing project for subordinated people--and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful--is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others” (1296). That is, most identity categories are polarized as being more or less privileged than others, creating social hierarchies. Thus, as Crenshaw notes, we need to be able to fully understand the complicated nuances that are involved when examining an individual’s placement on all of these cultural axes (1297).

This complexity of identity nuances is indeed something often overlooked, as when drag rhetoric is accused of being appropriative of femininity or “femaleness.” This approach is typically rooted in cisgendered, heteronormative assumptions that place drag queens in a more privileged role in the hierarchy of gender because drag queens usually identify as male, but the hierarchy between queer and heterosexual is overlooked. Similar over-simplifications are made when drag queens are accused of appropriating trans culture, even though a large number of drag performers don’t necessarily identify as cisgender, or are accused of appropriating race, when a significant part of American drag culture was originally established by black drag queens, and given the fact that drag
culture has been originated from diverse cultural backgrounds of race, ethnicity, and social class.

Crenshaw’s original theory has been challenged and eventually modified, most notably by Patricia Hill Collins. In her article, “Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue,” Collins states that intersectional scholarship’s focus on “how intersecting power relations of race/class/gender/sexuality shape individual and group-based social locations... has catalyzed considerable attention to questions of individual groups and identities” (452). Thus, Collins argues that “the trajectory of intersectionality has been characterized by increasing attention to individual identities and less focus on group or collective identities,” which is why she believes that “intersectionality’s analysis of complex social inequalities might stimulate pragmatist analyses of communities as infused with power and politics” (452). Collins believes that when pragmatism and intersectionality are combined, “both contribute to a potentially more comprehensive understanding of social inequality, power, and politics [because] intersectionality contributes the important insight that social inequalities are multiple, complex, and mutually constructing” (455). According to Collins, pragmatism would broaden Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality by taking it from focusing on identity categories to focus on the social structures that keep these categories in place and how these various identities interact with one another. Pragmatism thus provides “a ready-made set of conceptual tools for advancing arguments about social inequalities [and] all of the major constructs of the pragmatist canon might be strengthened by a sustained engagement with intersectionality’s emphasis on power” (Collins 455). Therefore, Crenshaw’s theory began the preliminary stages of development
and conversations about how individual identity categories dictate how people might be
treated, then Collins advanced Crenshaw’s theory by focusing on how individuals might be treated based on having a combination of various identity categories.

**Gloria Anzaldúa’s** border theory, as discussed in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, is an example of how Crenshaw’s theory can be applied to various contexts that deal with cultural intersections. Since Anzaldúa’s theory is based on the intersections between the United States’ and Mexico’s territory, as well as the Chicana identity that has developed from the cultural mixings of white-European, Native American, and Mexican races, it connects to intersectional theory because it involves uniting severed pieces of culture and identity into a third-space category that is greater than its components, which Anzaldúa calls a “mestiza consciousness.” Anzaldúa writes that the Fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out of synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—*a mestiza consciousness*—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (101-2)

Anzaldúa’s emphasis on what would normally be considered “severed” or fragmented pieces of identity being synthesized into something better is an ideology that is indicative of intersectional theory because it emphasizes the sociocultural privileges and
oppressions that work in unison for those with intersectional identities. However, the idea that “mestiza consciousness” has the power to break down paradigms seems to shift the focus from just acknowledging cultural intersections to having these amalgams of various identities actually deconstruct structures of unity that have been privileged. In this sense, drag rhetoric appears to break down paradigms of gender, race, sexuality, and class to create its own unified culture and identity category that’s specific to drag. The deconstructive aspect of border theory also seems to be where the queer aspect of “mestiza consciousness” comes into place.

Anzaldúa’s theory implements an ideology that has been written from her own intersectional identity as a lesbian Chicana. She writes that “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures… the answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts” (Anzaldúa 102). In this case, Anzaldúa proposes that the queer aspect of her intersectional identity is the “third element” that unifies the many cultural dichotomies that exist because queer people come from all races, but unlike women, a part of queer culture involves creating multiracial communities outside of the biological family because queer people of any race are often rejected by their families. Therefore, the concept of queerness as a whole, which includes gender, sexual, as well as racial fluidity, is outlined in Anzaldúa’s theory. She reaches this point in her theory by contending that “as a mestiza, I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all counties are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of
me in all races” (Anzaldúa 102). Anzaldúa continues by arguing that her feminism has
demed her cultureless because she challenges, or even queers, traditional societal
constructs while simultaneously creating a new culture that explains “the world and our
participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each
other and to the planet” (103). Anzaldúa’s notion that having a queer identity links her to
women and queer people shows that her racial and ethnic intersections from being
Chicana are not the only qualities that link her to Native Americans, Mexicans, and white
people, but also women and queer people of all races. This intersectional linkage that
Anzaldúa is conceptualizing between sexual, gendered, and racial identities seems to be
one of the few theories that is capable of grasping the multiple identity nuances that are
addressed in drag performance because even though drag primarily exists as a queer art
form, it is also a remediation of race and class because openly queer people, especially
drag performers, have been marginalized from the status quo. Because of this
marginalization, drag rhetoric often emphasizes low-brow and racialized expressions of
working class culture, which is typically thought of as over-the-top by the upper classes.

In her ethnography of a bar that features drag performances, Katie R. Horowitz
discusses the nuances of identity categories that are present in drag’s depiction of race
and class in the essay, “The Trouble with ‘Queerness’: Drag and the Making of Two
Cultures.” She compares the rhetoric between what she calls “kinging,” the performance
of females impersonating a male image, and “queening,” which involves males
 impersonating the female image, by stating that “the bricolage of racial, sexual, gender,
and class identities that constitute kinging as a genre would be impermissible within the
generic conventions of queening, whose performers depend on the invisibility of real-
world social structures to reinforce the illusion of their own celebrity” (Horowitz 308-9); that is, queening usually depends on the deconstruction of feminine racial, sexual, and class categories because drag’s over-the-top allusion to these structures makes issues with social hierarchies more apparent. Horowitz continues assessing drag queen performances by arguing that “race is analogously pressed into the service of maintaining illusions” in queening. Because similar to sexuality, race “is subordinated to an ideal of celebrity and socioeconomic status, racial crossings often appear to go unremarked” (309). Therefore, Horowitz contends that drag kings’ performance of race is better at expanding “the definition of race to mean more than a fixed set of characteristics inhering in certain bodies” (309). An example she presents is her analysis of drag king, Xavier Alexander Jade, who in one instance “imported the gangsta swagger characteristic of rap videos to a country music number; in another [instance], he complicated his own co-option of Usher’s ladies’ man persona by pulling up his shirt to reveal his binder, the undergarment that many kings and transmen wear to conceal their breasts” (Horowitz 308). Horowitz also comments on how drag king performances utilize presumptions of gender and inauthenticity in order to “highlight the equally inorganic production of race,” as well as “performances of gayness or sexual submissiveness, which might be assumed to threaten the illusion of masculinity” (308). Horowitz’s argument here is primarily focused on the drag kings in her study, but the same can be said for drag queens because most conceptions of masculinity and femininity are linked to race, and possibly even class, ability, age etc, in some way and drag queens usually embody male identities that are feminine out of drag and articulate powerful femininity in drag; therefore, gendered rhetoric from drag performance can be articulated through queening, as well as kinging.
A valid issue that Horowitz appears to address, however, is the fact that most drag scholarship has typically focused on what is probably recognized as “the standard” form of drag that involves queening, which causes people to overlook the cultural nuances that appear in drag king performances. Nonetheless, Horowitz’s point that drag reveals how race, as well as gender and sexuality, are performative, shows how drag rhetoric involves various cultural intersections.

In his sociolinguistic analysis of Suzanne, a drag queen who performs at a gay bar in the southeastern United States, Stephen L. Mann, in “Drag Queens’ Use of Language and the Performance of Blurred Gendered and Racial Identities,” addresses the linguistic component of drag rhetoric and specifically of racial and gendered “styleswitching.” Mann contends that “by employing linguistic features shared by multiple socially and regionally defined language varieties--rather than simply switching among them--Suzanne[, a white drag performer,] is able to effectively perform an identity that frequently blurs gender and racial lines” (794). He defines Suzanne’s linguistic blurring of the boundaries between gender and race as “stylemixing,” which is “the use of linguistic features found in multiple styles” (Mann 798). Mann believes that analyzing Suzanne’s use of stylemixing “provides insight into the ways in which Suzanne uses her linguistic resources to negotiate aspects of her character’s racial and gendered identities, which frequently blur lines between female and male, feminine and masculine, and black and white” (798-9). An example of Suzanne’s stylemixing includes the way that she “overemphasizes the southern belle style when talking to individual audience members [and] uses this style to gain their trust and make them more willing to participate in various interactive portions of the show, even at the risk of their own embarrassment” as
an MC for a drag show (Mann 799). This example of Suzanne’s performance indicates a sense of modesty that is usually expected from southern women to establish that she is friendly and hospitable; however, Suzanne is also strategically using this feminine behavior to gain rapport with her audience so she can make them set her up for a joke thus illustrating intersections of a particular U.S. region, class, race, and gender as a white southern belle who is also somewhat of a trickster. A more profound example that Mann provides is Suzanne’s use of the word “honey,” because this term is analogous to the southern belle character that Suzanne typically performs; however, “it is also found as a form of address in both Gay Male English (GME) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE)” (800). This is not to say that Suzanne is an overt appropriator of AAVE, but as Mann explains:

She shares the stage each night with a primarily African-American cast who use AAVE regularly both on and off stage. She has regular access, therefore, to AAVE features, as well as the AAVE rhetorical devices that her African-American costars use in their own performances. She also has the motivation to use AAVE features in order to demonstrate her connectedness to and claim membership within their network. (800)

Therefore, Mann’s assessment illustrates how particular linguistic features are not exclusively linked to one particular race or group. Mann’s analysis, like intersectional theory, addresses the complexity of cultural nuances that are often misunderstood because they are typically examined through one particular cultural perspective, when they should be examined through a combination of perspectives, as Collins argues. Similar to what Horowitz implies, Mann’s implication that AAVE is a rhetorical device
that Suzanne, as well as black drag performers, use as part of their interactions with audience members also appears to make the argument that drag rhetoric calls attention to the idea that race might be as performative as gender.

As Horowitz’s and Mann’s studies reveal, most minority cultures perform in ways that might be thought of as stereotypical to the hegemonic majority, which reifies what the rest of that population expects of them; however, aside from the cultural contexts behind the performances of minority races or ethnicities, these seemingly stereotypical behaviors might also be a strategy for subverting the hegemonic group. For example, since queer men are often thought of as having a hyper-sexual lust for straight men, their subversive disidentifactory performance of their perceived homosexuality could be to aggressively hit on a straight man who holds these kinds of assumptions in order to make him uncomfortable while ironically reifying the stereotypical expectation. The performers in Mann’s and Horowitz’s studies appear to convey similar messages related to racial stereotypes that have been assumed.

Thus, by disidentifying with and subverting the hegemony, drag performers are performing a type of critical pedagogy. By engaging with a pedagogy that helps students understand the strategies of subversion that the drag community uses not only to communicate certain messages, but survive in the normative population, composition students should be able to learn how to operate within academic and professional settings with a heightened level of communication skills that empower them to liberate themselves. Intersectional theory has deepened the understanding of power in relation to social structures and since identity categories that function as systems of power cannot be understood in isolation from one another, they “intersect and co-produce one another to
result in unequal material realities, the distinctive social experiences that characterize them, and intersecting belief systems that construct and legitimate these social arrangements” (Collins 455). Therefore, the intersectional quality involved with drag culture when applied to a new critical pedagogy should acknowledge the fact that every student approaches the classroom with different experiences of having institutional power, as well as oppression, and instructors who implement drag pedagogy should be aware that even though social hierarchies might be invisible within the classroom, they are still there and should be addressed.

**Theorizing Drag Rhetoric’s Pedagogical Value**

As new college students begin acquiring an identity and level of thought that is not exclusively bound to their families or groups of friends from high school, they might begin acknowledging what their identities of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability mean to the rest of the world, as well as how those identities interact with other people’s identities. Drag typifies a heightened level of consciousness and meta-awareness of the performative nature of various identity categories. Since the topic of identity categories may be a sensitive subject in first-year composition courses, adapting the subversive strategies of drag rhetoric can help subvert freshmen into critically examining the many facets of people’s identities that are privileged, as well as the ones that are oppressed. By acquiring rhetorical skills that are derived from the drag community, a highly oppressed group whose subversive communication has not been primarily examined in great depth, college freshmen can learn how to survive their acculturation processes into the academic setting and beyond, thus liberating themselves. In a Freirian sense, drag pedagogy can
guide oppressed students, as well as students who have oppressed, towards liberating
themselves as people who have been unconsciously following institutional prescriptions
because they can only be liberated by the oppressed. Drag rhetoric’s pedagogy should
focus on awakening freshmen students’ perceptions of themselves and the world they are
living in, as well as providing guidance toward a level of consciousness that allows them
to be empowered by their communication.

Freirian Critical Pedagogy

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire theorizes an educational philosophy
that involves people from oppressed groups teaching and learning how to become
autonomous thinkers in a world that infantilizes them while simultaneously liberating
oppressors to think outside of the prescriptions of oppression because the system that
imposes these prescriptions and separations between groups has to be confronted. For
example, the mere act of a man getting into drag subverts gendered prescriptions that
have been imposed onto queer men, which challenges spectators of any gender and
sexual identity to reconsider previous conceptions of how gender “should” be performed.
In this instance, if a female spectator were to accuse this queen of appropriating
femininity, that spectator would not only be imposing cisnormative prescriptions onto
that drag queen by assuming that the queen is cisgender, but ignoring the feminine
prescriptions that are often assigned to queer men as well. This hypothetical situation
highlights the complicated phenomena related to drag’s intersectionality, as well as
illustrates how drag relates to Freire’s theory because attempting to aid the oppressed, as
opposed to the oppressor, in this situation must involve overlooking the underlying prescriptions that caused such a situation to occur.

One of the ways that oppressors and the oppressed participate in this culture of oppression is by unconsciously following particular scripts that have been learned and demonstrated by society. Therefore, when college freshmen begin the acculturation process into academic life, they often take their “prescribed” identities that function within the oppressive system for granted as something inherent. Freire writes that prescriptions are “one of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed” because every prescribed belief or behavior “represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another,” thus making the oppressed person’s consciousness into one that aligns with the oppressor’s consciousness (46-7). Therefore, this phenomenon of oppressive prescriptions reveals an insidious duality that oppressed people are faced with because if they really want to be liberated, they have to choose between

Being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent; castrated in their power to create and recreate, in their power to transform the world. (Freire 48)

Since students are raised in environments that are dominated by oppressive authoritarians who prescribe their ideologies onto the impressionable, the way that medical authorities
prescribe medication to sickly patients, they are heavily influenced and even comforted by the guidance of their authority figures. On this note, it would be challenging to the point of being threatening to directly confront a new college student’s prescribed identity because it involves stripping them of the comfort of subservience that they’ve been accustomed to. The articulation of drag rhetoric typically involves a similar level of vulnerability because it goes against oppressive prescriptions of gender and sexuality; however, the practice of drag rhetoric is often empowering not only to queer people, but other kinds of people with non-normative identities represented in drag performance. In order to break students out of the state of complacency that oppressors have set for them, they have to engage in the transformative process that Freire outlines in his philosophy.

Freire proposes that pedagogy of the oppressed involves a two-step process that confronts a culture of domination and detracts oppressed people from what he refers to as “egoistic interests of the oppressors” (54). He defines the oppressor’s egoistic interests as an egoism that is “cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism,” which keeps oppressed individuals in a subservient and infantilizing position (Freire 54). The first stage Freire proposes for pedagogy of the oppressed is to “unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” because it is often the case that oppressed people don’t know that they are being oppressed or are unaware of the extent of their oppression (54). Following this transformation of reality, Freire’s second stage “ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” because oppressors should also be freed from the culture of domination (54). Similar to how drag rhetoric confronts normative assumptions about identity by exposing queer realities and the malleability of identity to both queer and non-
queer audiences, Freire’s pedagogy confronts the reality of oppression without excluding those who have oppressed or those who have been oppressed. If somebody does not expose students to the reality of oppression, they must continue living lives that have been distorted by institutions that have kept them from the liberation of critical thought.

In *A Pedagogy For Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, Ira Shor and Paulo Freire contend that unveiling one’s oppression “is one of the main tasks of liberating education” because it gives learners the autonomy to think outside of their oppressor’s prescriptions (36). These authors argue that “the reproducing task of the dominant ideology implies making reality opaque, to prevent the people from gaining critical awareness, from ‘reading’ critically their reality, from grasping the raison d’etre of the facts they discover” because oppressors often aim to obscure reality for the oppressed, while the liberating instructor’s task is to illuminate reality (Shor and Freire 36). In order for instructors to illuminate reality for their students, they must understand their students as individuals who are approaching a given discipline at different stages of the learning process, which means that they are at varied levels of critical thought. One way to engage a student’s critical thought within the learning process is for instructors to understand that a student’s initial attempt at a given task, such as writing, is going to mimic the previous prescriptions that have been imposed onto them up to that point until they are fully liberated and embodied as writers.

**Empowering Only the Oppressed**

In his book, *Writing on the Margins: Essays on Composition and Teaching*, David Bartholomae addresses how composition instructors should approach teaching
students from marginalized groups without oppressing them with standard academic prescriptions of *how they should write*. To start, he identifies a performative element to the composition student’s role in the classroom by arguing that their performances represent “a moment in which, by speaking or writing, a student must enter into a closed community, with its secrets, codes and rituals,” where they are expected to assume which scripts and conventions are appropriate to follow in attempt to play a role that is specific to the writing classroom (Bartholomae 89). Bartholomae explains this performative phenomenon by stating that students have to “appropriate or be appropriated by a specialized discourse... as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy and, of course, he is not” (89). Similar to Muñoz’s point about queer minorities having to learn disidentifactory behaviors on their own as they experience how society treats them and observe examples of how to act, freshman composition students also have to consciously perform their roles as writers and students until they have acquired enough experience to embody their assumed roles as college students. Bartholomae also acknowledges the reality that most writers don’t reside as easily in the academy as new writers might assume by stating that “the most perverse thing we do is to allow some (including ourselves) to believe that the language of the university is genuine” because understanding is not “genuine,” but something that is acquired through an act of appropriation. Perhaps what an experienced writer has that an inexperienced writer lacks is a consciousness of that appropriation, particularly as that consciousness is manifested in the style on the page—in its record of push and shove—and not just in a writer’s felt
sense of loss, his sense that whatever he has written is not quite right, that
the very act of writing has pushed him somehow onto the margins. (117)
Bartholomae’s argument about learning the performance of writing seems to reflect the
idea that no prescription, whether it be language, gender, or otherwise, is as genuine as
some might assume, which is an idea that becomes apparent when a conscious instructor
is teaching somebody a new skill. Bartholomae also appears to see a pedagogical value in
the act of appropriating a new discourse because appropriation seems to be a necessary
step for learners to attempt performing something that is new to them. After students
reach a level of proficiency in a given discourse--academic writing, drag performance,
etc.--they would become embodied within that discourse.

Jose Muñoz addresses how queer people become embodied by discussing an
unfortunate truth that most minority children grow up in the United States without having
heroes that share the same skin color, gender, or sexual identity as them, which appears to
jump start their disidentifactory behaviors as they grow into being minority citizens. In
Muñoz’s discussion about Jean-Michel Basquiat’s negotiation with institutional racism in
the 1980s U.S. art culture as a black artist, he states that practices of disidentification are
Not anything like intrinsic attributes that a subject is born with. More
nearly, these practices are learned. They are not figured out alone, they are
informed by the examples of others. These identifications with others are
often mediated by a complicated network of incomplete, mediated, or
crossed identifications. They are also forged by the pressures of everyday
life, forces that shape a subject and call for different tactical responses. It
is crucial that such children are able to look past “self” and encounter
others who have managed to prosper in such spaces. Sometimes a subject needs something to identify with; sometimes a subject needs heroes to mimic and to invest all sorts of energies in. (37-8)

Therefore, similar to the implications in Freire’s theory, Muñoz’s disidentification theory acknowledges that minority, especially queer, subjects are typically forced to learn how they will be treated by the heteronormative majority as soon as they are exposed to examples of it, which means that they also have to learn how to respond to and survive in such an unwelcoming environment on their own. However, unlike Freire’s pedagogy, disidentification does not appear to seek liberating the oppressive discourses it goes against by approaching the prescriptions that oppress these minority subjects. Drag pedagogy would incorporate teaching a level of this queer autonomy to some extent because college students should be exposed to the realities that oppressed people live in and embody. Since most college freshmen still abide by the prescriptions that were taught to them in their home environments, part of drag pedagogy’s appeal involves troubling various prescriptions of identity on either side of oppression that haven’t yet been troubled in these students’ lives.

How Queer Pedagogies’ Praxis Empowers Oppressors and the Oppressed

In his article, “Queering the Writing Center,” Harry Denny theorizes a queer pedagogy to use in writing centers that seeks to help freshmen writers become more embodied by troubling some of their heteronormative assumptions about identity in order to guide their critical thinking and reading. He claims that when students begin writing papers with a specific audience and rhetorical purpose in mind, they are forced “away
from safe confines of the personal and local, their ways of knowing confront a complex interplay of the dominant, the oppositional, the subversive, and the self” because audience and rhetorical analyses usually require a sense of self reflectiveness that most people who are a part of hegemonic cultures typically don’t have (Denny 46). Similar to what Muñoz proposes as part of disidentification, Denny addresses how queer people, like most marginalized groups, find ways of adapting to the predominant world without compromising their identity that appears to deviate from the assumed norm by arguing that queer pedagogical practice is rooted in a subversive agenda to demystify and de-naturalize structuring dynamics. As with most people who lack status in our society, sexual minorities develop mechanisms to cope with forces of domination. Queer folk create subcultures comprised of neighborhoods and support networks, and we develop ways to integrate with larger society, making strategic decisions about when to invoke our identities and experiences and when to proselytize about who we are. (49)

As Muñoz proposes, queer people have to find ways of adapting to the hegemonic culture even if they don’t completely align with that culture’s values or beliefs because it is a strategy of survival. However, by focusing primarily on the sexual aspect of queerness and the act of coming out, Denny appears to have a largely homonormative approach to his pedagogy. For example, he relates the tutor-student ice-breaking process in tutoring sessions to how queer people are expected to be transparent about their sexualities by pointing out how before collaborative learning in a tutorial is to take place, “students must offer themselves up for analysis and interpretation by laying their writing sins and
self on the table for absolution [because] students are compelled to come out, to mark themselves, as writers with particular sets of needs that individualize themselves in a context, where no one else is being marked as different or coming out themselves” (57). Even though viewing pedagogy in this sense is relevant to drag because drag is typically seen as an apparent marking of queerness, Denny’s approach seems to be rooted in the invisibility of homosexuality, while drag pedagogy not only addresses various sexualities, but expressions of gender nonconformity, race, class, and other categories. The critical aspect of drag pedagogy would involve a similar self-reflectiveness to Denny’s theory; however, drag pedagogy would also incorporate Bartholomae’s idea that freshman writing is an appropriative performance, as well as Freire’s critical approach to prescriptions.

In Jonathan Alexander’s article, “Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body,” he describes a writing assignment he designed that asks students to write fictive narratives from the perspective of a character of the “opposite gender.” Alexander explains that this activity “extends critical awareness to all students of how writing can be used to explore the intersections between the seemingly personal (a sense of gender, a sense of sexuality) and the political (sociocultural expectations of appropriate gender and sexual behavior)” because students presumably approach the writing classroom with expertise in living with one gender identity, so this assignment challenges students to assume a different gender identity in their writing (51). Similar to Denny’s pedagogy, Alexander’s assignment uses composition as a tool for students to explore broader perspectives that are related to queer issues by having them adopt identities that deviate from their own realities, which should also sharpen their
rhetorical skills and audience analyses. Alexander claims that this assignment extends his student’s critical awareness of gender by stating that “part of the transgender project, then, is not just to alert others to the presence of differently gendered people or those who experience their gender in ways other than strictly masculine or feminine, but also to examine critically how gender limits our potential sense of self” because it is often assumed that people can be or always are one gender as opposed to the other (54). Even though Alexander’s lesson appears to involve having students think critically about their genders, it seems to reify the gender binary because there seems to be an underlying assumption that all students are cisgender, which does not seem empowering or inclusive of gender nonconforming students. Moreover, another issue that is implicit in this pedagogy seems to assume that trans individuals are capable of transitioning from pre-op transgender identities to post-op “cisgender” identities, which is problematic because it ignores the nuanced differences in social status and experiences between post-op trans individuals and cisgender individuals. Therefore, drag pedagogy would not ask students to engage in what Lorrayne Carroll refers to as rhetorical drag, but have students learn and apply the critical and cultural elements that are related to drag rhetoric in the composition classroom.

In Steven P. Schacht’s article, “Paris is Burning: How Society’s Stratification Systems Make Drag Queens of Us All,” he addresses what seems to be the first attempt to incorporate concepts of drag culture into college curriculum. He executes this in his sociology class “by introducing course participants to a reality that most, if not all, are quite unfamiliar with” because he believes that a film like Paris is Burning would force “many of them to relationally question the basis of their own experiences and
perspectives” (Schacht 151). Schacht uses the themes of gender, class, race, and sexuality that are shown in this documentary to make his predominantly white, heterosexual, middle class, male student body “recognize the intimately personal nature of political realities” (154) and reflect upon the “‘silly ways’ in which they go about demonstrating their gender,” which even lead some of them to the conclusion that “the ways in which they ‘do’ gender can be oppressive to themselves (typically women) or others (typically men)” (160). Similar to Denny’s and Alexander’s queer themed pedagogies, Schacht’s appears to involve a level of self-reflection about dichotomous perceptions of gender and sexuality. Schacht also seems to briefly incorporate the cultural intersections involved with drag by showing Paris is Burning and discussing the other social demographic issues that are involved with drag and queer culture in order to trouble his student’s preconceptions of gender and sexuality.

Schacht conveys a similar message in another article, “Beyond the Boundaries of the Classroom: Teaching about Gender and Sexuality at a Drag Show,” that shows his attempt to queer his sociology class that focused on gender and sexuality. Schacht claims that his experiences from inviting students to observe drag performances is “an excellent way to experientially challenge their dichotomous, often oppressive, beliefs about social categories of female and male, gay and straight,” which in turn, appears to blur the boundaries between the college classroom and gay bar to experientially force his students into reconsidering their previous assumptions of gender and sexuality (227-8). For ethical reasons, Schacht never required students to attend drag shows, but an example of this “experiential forcing” of students that he notes was that “for many of these young men, walking into a gay bar is their first experience they have ever had where they have felt
like a social minority [because most] men who have attended drag shows have reported feeling totally out of place, like a foreigner in a strange land, where the rules of interaction that usually benefit them are no longer present” in this unfamiliar queer environment (231). Along similar lines, he reports that most of the women in his classes claim to enjoy a sexual harassment-free experience at the gay venue, and “often find it quite enjoyable to see the ‘straight boys’ get hit on [because] most men are clueless about what it feels like to be the recipient of unwanted sexual advances, and to be witness to their discomfort as a social minority is quite fun” for them (Schacht 235). Even though both examples of Schacht’s pedagogy involve making students think more critically about gender and sexuality, his classes seem to be more about studying drag as a sociological culture to be examined instead of applying aspects of drag culture into how he teaches. Moreover, the latter example of Schacht’s incorporation of drag into the classroom appears to Other the performers and bar patrons that are being observed as spectacles under a microscope because there is an implicit assumption that most of the heterosexual men in his class were uncomfortable in a queer setting and that they were bound to be pursued by the queer outsiders who weren’t classmates. Similar to Alexander’s assignment, Schacht’s pedagogy appears to reify heteronormative standards of gender and sexuality, even though he aims to deviate from them, because his observations seem to overlook the nuances of drag performance and queer culture. Schacht’s emphasis for incorporating pedagogy into a gay bar seemed to primarily involve the shock value of having presumably sheltered heterosexual students encounter a queer setting, which could have been accomplished at any queer setting with or without a drag performance taking place.
Future Research Implications

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire theorizes an educational philosophy that is grounded with intentions to liberate and empower people who participate in the culture of oppression. Freire contends that in order for the liberation of oppressed people to serve its purpose, the newly liberated oppressed must strive to restore their own, as well as their oppressor’s humanity, instead of becoming oppressors themselves (44). Further, in order for oppressed citizens to learn how to be autonomous people, Freire argues that “this lesson and apprenticeship must come... from the oppressed themselves and from those who are truly solidary with them” because if the oppressed are being liberated by oppressors through what he calls “false generosity,” they aren’t actually experiencing empowerment and liberation (45). According to Freire, the oppressed “will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it” because this fight for liberation “will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors’ violence” (45). Therefore, drag pedagogy can guide oppressed students, as well as students who have oppressed, towards liberating themselves as people who have been unconsciously following institutional prescriptions.

I will conclude by suggesting how the usefulness of drag rhetoric can be applied to critical composition pedagogy, which will utilize a drag-themed methodology with liberatory intentions as influenced by Freire’s pedagogical theory. Drag rhetoric’s pedagogy should focus on awakening freshmen students’ perceptions of themselves and the world they are living in, as well as providing guidance toward a level of consciousness that allows them to be empowered by their communication. For example,
those who feel weakened by their femininity can learn how to be empowered by their femininity in a way that reflects how drag queens subversively use femininity to their advantage. On the other hand, hetero- or homonormative males who might view femininity as weakening or demeaning, can have their perceptions of gender complicated by learning how something like cultural masculinity not only oppresses women or those who are feminine, but oppresses them with unrealistic standards of conventional masculinity as well.
3. CAMP TRADITIONS IN DRAG RHETORIC: DISCOVERING THE RHETORIC OF EMBODIMENT, TRANSGRESSION, AND SUBVERSION IN DRAG HISTORY

In this chapter, I am going to contextualize queening as an articulation of complex cultural symbols related to gender that are often taken for granted in heteronormative society because it is primarily queer people that are able to identify such nuances in the dominant culture since normative subtleties are typically used to marginalize queers. Therefore, drag’s articulation of gendered symbols appears to use subversive rhetorical strategies that transgress hegemonic scripts of normative identity enactments in order to make incongruous heteronormative assumptions more apparent to audiences. A primary example of heteronormative scripts that are often used to the oppressor’s advantage in marginalizing queer people, thus resulting in some blasphemous queer reversals by drag queens, is Judeo-Christian beliefs that culturally place queer people and women beneath heterosexual men.

Traditionally, maleness and masculinity have been thought of as the “standard” or “default” to gender identity, while femaleness and femininity are considered to be additives to the masculinist foundation. This ideology appears to be rooted in the belief that woman was created by man’s rib in “Genesis” because it is known in Judeo-Christian religions that since Adam, the first man ever to be created, was made before, Eve, the first woman and his wife that God used a part of Adam to create Eve. Therefore, this biblical gender construct places the human male in a superior role over the human female because it implies that male is the “standard” that came directly from God, while female
came from male, which culturally places females a step further from God. Furthermore, the mere creation of Eve in this story appears to function as God’s afterthought to provide Adam with a subservient companion who is a part of him, while he isn’t a part of her, and her feminine quality of bearing children serves as yet another afterthought from God for disobeying Him. In this case, the series of afterthoughts that appear characteristic of Eve in “Genesis” imply that Eve was essentially a lesser version of Adam when she was created, then she was punished with femininity as a consequence for her transgressions against God, which made her a version of Adam that was deformed with extraneous feminine qualities. With this cultural backdrop, the belief that woman derived from man or that woman is essentially man with feminine additives has evolved to the level that femininity is commonly associated with being excessive in popular culture.

In contrast, the construction of masculinity, which supposedly represents qualities related to strength, seem to involve an implicit “defending” or “preserving” of its fleeting existence. This makes cultural attributions that qualify certain people or objects as “masculine” an ironically delicate matter that provides vast terrain for cultural troublings in camp media. Since queening is commonly recognized for its over-the-top re-articulations of femininity by queer men, who are often thought of as a threat to masculinity, drag seems to involve subverting masculinist assumptions of gender and sexuality by making the nuances that limit queer access to masculine privilege more apparent because it demonstrates that not all queer men desire that privilege and can access certain privileges by different means, namely through femininity. This strategy of subverting and reversing privileges that men “should” desire is something that is common in camp media.
As indicated by Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner in their book, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, although simplistic normative perceptions of gender and sexuality are often uncritically accepted by the status quo, drag and other kinds of camp performances are able to execute transgressive statements via satirical performances in popular culture. As these authors note, “gender and sexuality are key axes on which camp has turned historically, especially as available in gay male and cross dressing cultures and epitomized in ‘drag’” (Shugart and Waggoner 4-5), which functions as a queering of gender constructs as displayed in media. However, queening rhetoric also goes beyond the mere queering of mainstream media fare because it also troubles cisnormative assumptions that gender embodiment and performance exclusively binds masculinity to the male sex and femininity to the female sex, which is dictated by conventions. In particular, contemporary drag queen performances leave unstable masculinity behind, while taking the idea of excessive femininity to levels that exceed conventional cisgendered femaleness.

The critical elements of camp rhetoric in relation to its over-the-top depictions of cultural categories serve as a foundation to the critical aspect of drag rhetoric. As a component of camp, drag serves as an over-the-top remediation of cultural categories that can be present not only in popular media, but in person as well. Like camp in general, drag provides social critiques of how culture relates to identity in humorous ways that are transgressive and politically subversive; however, drag performance is more lived and embodied than scripted camp media, which allows drag rhetoric to add elements of camp to a wider variety of contexts that exceed the screen and stage. Therefore, I am going to argue that drag performance is a physical act of rhetorical embodiment that uses the
communication of gendered messages as a foundational medium to subversively transgress hegemonic conventions that are in place since gender is typically used as a cultural measuring rod that dictates power dynamics. To make this case, I am going to discuss three monumental drag performers—Julian Eltinge (1881-1941), Divine (1945-1988), and Evita (1945–)—because analyzing each of these queens provide a critical understanding of how cultural changes influenced drag rhetoric in their given historical contexts, which then influenced the embodiment of dual identities in both mannerism and appearance, the transgressive flaunting of being considered culturally monstrous, and the subversion of political status-quos that oppress them.

**Julian Eltinge: Drag as a Rhetorical Embodiment**

The first drag rhetor whom I will discuss is the early-twentieth century vaudeville performer Julian Eltinge. I have chosen to focus on Eltinge as an example of drag’s rhetorical embodiment at its early stages because he was one of the first famous drag queens and unlike Divine and Evita, Eltinge didn’t have a drag persona with its own name, which shows how drag at this time was a bit more disembodied. Even though he made an effort to preserve a heteronormative image during the Progressive Era (1890-1920) by publicizing the physical strain that men had to endure as drag performers to ensure audiences that his career in vaudeville was not a recreational choice, his off-stage persona as a heterosexual man was also transgressive and politically subversive. Eltinge’s performance of heteronormativity was transgressive because as scholars who study Eltinge imply, he is thought to be queer but put on an act of heterosexual masculinity that was as convincing as his drag persona’s femaleness in order to “pass” in a society that
didn’t accept deviations of gendered or sexual norms, especially when these deviations weren’t easily detectable. Therefore, by examining Eltinge, I can clarify how queening is a rhetorical medium that Eltinge used so he can appeal to his audience’s expectations of gender and sexuality during the early 1900s, namely by implying that the male/female binary can be flipped, but not blurred in the sense that we see in later drag performances.

*Julian Eltinge, His Own Drag Persona*

As a result of Eltinge’s concealment of his personal life, presumably to hide his queer sexuality from the public, consistent biographical information about his upbringing is difficult to pin down. The author of the biography webpage for *The Julian Eltinge Project*, an anticipated documentary that was meant to showcase Eltinge’s life, states that “accounts of Eltinge’s life are full of discrepancies” because it was eventually discovered that Eltinge’s real name was William J. Dalton, who is from Newton, Massachusetts, and the son of a barber/mining engineer (thejulianeltingeproject.com). Aside from these vague details, all other biographical information about Eltinge is about his new and professional life as a drag performer in New York. Laurence Senelick notes that Eltinge’s debut was on the Bijou Theatre’s stage in New York during 1904 when he played “a young collegian [who] disguise[d] himself as a lovely lady for most of the evening” in the comedic musical *Mr. Wix of Wickham*, “then perfected his illusion in vaudeville and in 1910 attained stardom in Otto Hauerbach’s *The Fascinating Widow*, [a play with] another dual role which he was to tour widely for many years” (307). Following what resembles an American trope that involves queer people from small towns relocating to New York City so they can start new lives as performers, Eltinge became a female
illusionist who was more respected than his peers because of the work that he put into appearing heterosexual and masculine.

Julian Eltinge stood out from his counterparts for being considered an illusionist by critics, instead of just a female impersonator, because not only did his drag persona convince audiences that he made a believable woman, but his out-of-drag persona as a masculine, heterosexual man was thought to be convincing as well. In “Julian Eltinge’s Manly Transformation,” Kevin Landis contends that Eltinge was more than just an early “drag star;” he “was instead a gender-bending magician” who dazzled audiences with intricate nuances of gender illusion that avoided sexual undertones and “was so good that he rendered the questions of gender almost irrelevant” (16). Part of Eltinge’s dazzling appeal came from juxtaposing his on-stage femininity with his off-stage masculinity. In fact, Eltinge emphasized that the juxtaposing transition between masculinity and femininity is a painful one in order to deflect any assumptions that his performance represented a queer gender or sexual identity, ironically highlighting the rhetorical embodiment that is involved in drag performance because he was intentionally doing this to present himself as acceptably heterosexual. His off-stage performance was also an overcompensation for the lack of masculinity in his drag performance that had a physical strain on his body.

Eltinge’s large, manly frame out of drag must have helped his performance of masculinity because it helped him to clearly emphasize the grueling process of feminizing his “inherent” masculinity. In his discussion of Eltinge, Senelick claims that Eltinge often wrote about how he accomplished his impersonations in his beauty magazines by stressing “the time-consuming difficulty of it all, particularly the agony of
squeezing his bulk into confining corsets which ‘saw him raw’ to achieve a twenty-four-inch waistline” and how he had to starve himself to do this (308). This emphasis on the “elbow grease” it took to feminize a heterosexual man’s body seemed to deliberately masculinize a discourse that would normally be perceived as queer because it implied that dressing in drag was “tough” and apparently a job for “tough men,” even though women had to put their bodies under similar stresses presumably because women did not have to go the extra mile to perform their gender that was considered inherent. Landis addresses how Eltinge “took great pains to insist that drag was a dreary obligation that was forced upon him by necessity” (16) and describes an animated clipping from the Harvard Theatre Collection that highlights Eltinge’s process of getting into drag. This cartoon that Landis describes shows a comical depiction of Eltinge’s large frame in comparison to his assistant, Shima, who is shown synching the female impersonator’s waist, to emphasize Eltinge’s masculinity, as well as the “taxing and unpleasant” process of squeezing into a corset (18). Landis suggests that this image illustrates how getting into drag is a “precise and complicated art” for such a burly man, as well as how Eltinge was obligated to perform this feminine illusion for his paying audiences (18).

Furthermore, Landis adds that “a butcher knife [in the cartoon] becomes an apt addition to the selling of the performer’s masculinity [because it] provides emergency relief [in case] the femininity overtakes the performer” (18) and Eltinge needed a quick escape from the steel-boned contraption that made women more physically appealing and docile because corsets not only synch the waist, but also confine the wearer’s breathing.

People during the early twentieth century feared sexual and gendered deviances, and yet were fascinated over gender bending vaudeville performances. Eltinge’s
performance of “appropriate” maleness outside of the vaudeville stage set him apart from
other female impersonators, which might have contributed to his popularity. In her
discussion about queer history in San Francisco, Nan Alamilla Boyd notes how Julian
Eltinge, unlike other female illusionists of his time, “reassuringly divorced gender from
sexuality” because “his offstage masculinity and presumed heterosexuality reassured
audiences that cross-gender performance did not imply sexual deviancy” (35). In
addition, Eltinge also had to distinguish his work from that of “drag queens and fairies in
order to protect the viability of [his] career” as a heterosexual male who crossed gendered
boundaries; however, Boyd contends that Eltinge and other female impersonators still
managed to enable “audiences to negotiate the boundaries of a changing sexual
landscape” in different ways (35). Consequently, even though Eltinge was attempting to
align himself with the Progressive Era’s heteronormative standards in spite of his non-
normative career of female impersonation, his attempt to alleviate cultural anxieties about
his sexuality also subversively challenged the idea that transgressive gender expressions
and homosexuality are inextricably linked to one another. This is to say that the dual
embodiments of a believably masculine heterosexual man and a believably feminine drag
persona disproved the cultural assumption that rhetorical femininity is representative of
queer sexual desires. Eltinge’s approach to “playing it straight” involved emphasizing his
disdain for getting into drag by showing and writing about the physical wear that putting
a corset on such a masculine man had on him, which consequently rhetoricized his
embodied identity of being a career male drag performer.

*Eltinge’s Masculine Performance for Progressive Era Audiences*
During the Progressive Era (1890-1920), the status of women became escalated as more began working and going to college, thus challenging men’s superior status over them. Given Eltinge’s gender-transgressive profession, his performed masculinity that countered his on-stage femininity seemed to be a necessary survival strategy during such an escalating time period that was not ready for the recognition of openly queer artists. In her article about the correlation between female impersonation and sexual deviancy in the early twentieth century, Sharon R. Ullman addresses the disjuncture between the cultural fascination with female impersonation during a time when female impersonators who were not performers were vehemently oppressed for cross dressing in their homes and private communities (574). She addresses this phenomenon by explaining how women’s “clamor” for civil rights and engagement “in more visible and confrontational civic activities during the Progressive Era” influenced social discussions of appropriate gendered behavior. A shift that affected men and the idea of masculinity because men had allegedly been stripped of their masculinity as a result of the changing gender roles (Ullman 576). With the man’s role and masculinity being up for question, the link between female impersonation and homosexuality became a concern. Male reviewers would emphasize the appeal of Eltinge’s female illusion because men might be “fooled” by this illusion in essence, finding a man sexually attractive. Ullman writes that regardless of how many editorials defended Eltinge’s masculinity and “his artistic creation that might produce a figure of male fantasy,” his and other impersonator’s “beauty, as produced on stage, magnified not only their talents but also their capacity to undermine gender certainty,” triggering a cultural anxiety that questioned whether female impersonators were actually men (583). With all of this distrust in how performed gender
could trigger sexual desire, it is no wonder why Eltinge felt the need to perform masculinity when he was out of drag: he was responding to the highly anticipated questions regarding not only his sexuality and ‘biological sex,’ but his social status of manhood that needed defending.

In order to defend his manhood, which was a delicate matter for most men during the Progressive Era, Eltinge fabricated a traditionally masculine image of himself to counteract his believably feminine performance when he was in drag. Landis states that Eltinge “launched a career-long attack on his would-be detractors, proclaiming his masculinity to the media before they had the opportunity to color him an effete” by having anything that was published about his personal life “so laced with masculine rhetoric as to read like propaganda coming from the great illusionist himself, as indeed it was” (17). Indeed, Eltinge even “befriended columnists from local newspapers in the towns and cities that he visited” to make sure “that his manly exploits would be covered positively in the papers” (Landis 17). This shows how Eltinge’s masculine out-of-drag persona was not only deliberate, but carefully guided by the female impersonator himself. Furthermore, Marlis Schweitzer discusses how writers helped Eltinge construct his acceptably male image, which they understood as an artistic “chameleon-like transformation” from Eltinge’s celebrity, instead of suspecting it to be an overcompensating preservation of Eltinge’s masculine sexual identity (129). Schweitzer addresses how “publicity articles depicted Eltinge as a burly man’s man--working on a farm, taking up boxing as an athletic pursuit, and so forth--who underwent incredible tortures to transform into a wasp-waisted female” (129), which was a performance that writers seemed to understand as just another part of being a public figure who wanted a
positive reception from fans. Eltinge’s fans who not only enjoyed his vaudeville performances, but consumed media about Eltinge’s personal life, lived in an era that was barely understanding sexualities, as well as gender expressions, that didn’t align with heteronormativity, which explains Eltinge’s efforts to protect his public persona as a heterosexual man who only performed in drag to make a living. Even though Eltinge made an effort to distinguish what he did for aesthetic appeal from what women typically had to, his masculinizing rhetoric for the process of feminization provides an embodied, queer performance of dress because it emphasizes how the process of complicating the gendered body is physically strenuous.

**Eltinge’s Rhetoric**

Even though Julian Eltinge is not necessarily a minority subject that Jose Esteban Muñoz would have applied his disidentification theory to because Eltinge was white and not openly queer, Eltinge’s repression of queerness and performance of heterosexual masculinity has disidentifactory qualities. Eltinge’s performance is an example of disidentification because his construction of an off-stage persona was a survival strategy that allowed him to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere” that would have punished him if he didn’t conform to the normative standards that were set for men during the Progressive Era (4). Examples of Eltinge’s negotiations include the heterosexual privilege that other female impersonators of his time weren’t granted in exchange for the concealment of his upbringing and personal life, his friendships with columnists who wrote about his masculine pursuits, and his apparent disdain for dressing in drag. By negotiating potential queerness for masculine privilege, Eltinge was able to
be queer and engage in a visibly queer artistic medium while subversively passing among his immediate audience as a heterosexual man.

Julian Eltinge’s defense of his masculinity and, more importantly, his manhood, functioned as an embodied rhetorical strategy because it emphasized how the performative aspect of being a drag queen, as well as being heterosexual, male, and masculine affects the body, which also highlighted how these seemingly separate spheres of gender performance and identity interacted with one another. Eltinge’s rhetoric was politically subversive because on the surface, it appeared unthreatening to audiences during the Progressive Era while subtly dismantling the cultural belief that these spheres of masculinity and femininity could not interact with one another, as well as the belief that such interactions would indicate homosexuality. Although Eltinge’s transgression was subtle because it needed to be, his rhetoric still managed to be transgressive nonetheless because the political subversion in his performance appeared to contradict his audience’s ideologies about how gender presentation informed sexual desire. Furthermore, his audience’s homophobia toward female impersonators appeared to be rooted in fear that Eltinge, and other impersonators, might present female illusions that are so convincing that they might trick male audience members into experiencing homosexual arousal. In retrospect, what really makes Eltinge’s drag rhetoric transgressive is the fact that his heteronormative performance disarmed audiences from suspicion of what would have been a “gay agenda” at the time, which must have exempted Eltinge from having to accept any blame that would have been placed on him whenever his performance influenced homosexual arousal in audience members. Thus, Eltinge’s refusal to take responsibility for his audience’s gullibility appears to deflect any blame
that would have been directed at him, and places the blame onto any audience member
that was so convinced by his female illusion that it created an arousing experience for
that person. In this hypothetical case, if a male audience member continues to experience
arousal from Eltinge’s female illusion in spite of the performer’s efforts to convince his
fans that he is not trying to seduce his male audience, Eltinge already did as much as
anyone can do to prevent that from happening, so any queer attraction to him must not be
the audience member’s fault. Therefore, Eltinge’s refusal to accept blame for his
audience’s reception of his performance emphasizes the idea that there must be an error
in the audience’s perception, which reflects more about the repressed culture than the
individual impersonator who was merely making a living as an entertainer.

Even though Eltinge made an effort to separate himself from other female
impersonators and drag queens of his time, he managed to encapsulate an essential aspect
of drag rhetoric that plants deeply rooted seeds of doubt about gender and sexuality into
audience members’ assumptions about their own identities that have been dictated to
them by heteronormative cultural influences. Since all Eltinge, and other drag performers,
needed to do to challenge cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality is put their
bodies through the physical anguish that Eltinge describes to acquire a superficial female
aesthetic, the rigid understandings of male and female, masculine and feminine, and
heterosexuality and homosexuality all appear as malleable and superficial as the female
impersonator’s body. Even though Eltinge did not explicitly articulate such a message,
his performances both on and off stage have shown how somebody can embody an
identity that amalgamates several facets of performance that have been understood to be
rigidly dichotomous during the early twentieth century. Shortly after Eltinge’s popularity,
however, the phenomenon of female impersonation underwent several complications, along with the rest of America and the world, as the Great Depression, major wars, and social movements of the twentieth century set in.

**Divine: Drag as Transgressive and Monstrous**

The next drag rhetor to be discussed is Divine. Even though Divine had an acting and singing career outside of her roles in John Waters films, Waters’ ‘trashy’ filmmaking aesthetic and subject matter was monumental in developing Divine’s infamous reputation as a monstrous drag icon. In fact, Divine has been described as “John Waters’ Godzilla of Drag” because of her monstrous reputation from starring as an overweight, tacky, sometimes criminal, flamboyant woman in Waters’ low-budget 1970s films such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), *Polyester* (1981), and *Hairspray* (1988).

Thus, just as it is difficult to separate Socrates from Plato’s “Socrates,” it is difficult, not to mention a disservice, to separate Divine from John Waters’ creation of “Divine.”

Harris Glenn Milstead, better known as Divine, represents an era of drag and queerness that far exceeds the sociopolitical climate of Eltinge’s era. Since Eltinge’s time, queer notoriety and its contrast from heteronormativity has become apparent in popular and American culture, which influenced John Waters’ use of camp in the outlandish worlds and characters that he created. In particular, instead of being subtle with her deviance by playing it straight, Divine subverted the heteronormative status quo that rejected her and other queers by embodying a drag persona that was intentionally grotesque and monstrous both in appearance and behavior. Divine’s and Waters’ camp-based strategy involved reversing cultural values in order to make trash and queerness
desirable, and heteronormativity undesirable. As a result, they created a “filthy” value system that placed them at the top of their new hierarchy.

An Emergence of Queer Discourse

The historical gap between Divine and Eltinge is large because Eltinge’s career ended at the Great Depression’s onset, which was followed by World War II (1939-1945), then Vietnam (1954-1975), as well as the Civil Rights Movement and Sexual Revolution in the 1960s. Therefore, even though Waters and Divine were born just after the Depression and lived through this eventful, roughly fifty-year, gap in history, there were few prominent drag figures until after mass popular culture took off and queer culture became more recognized.

In Andrew Ross’ discussion of camp media and its relation to pop/queer culture, he indicates that Stonewall, as well as the commercialization of AIDS as an excuse to quarantine queer people, played a pivotal role in queer autonomy because these hegemonic rejections led queer people to establish specifically queer institutions. As a result, camp played a subversive, yet critical, role in establishing new queer institutions because after Hollywood started phasing out from its 1950s “bourgeois” moment, as Ross calls it, “the historical incongruity of this displacement” created a “world of tragic-ironic meanings” that gave leverage to camp’s queer political exploitation of heteronormative culture (4). Thus, Ross contends, camp “involves a celebration, on the part of the cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the very process by which it locates hitherto unexpected value in a popular or obscure text” (10). Therefore, camp’s relation to “bad” taste is measured by its political appeal because “the fun and
pleasure created by camp is often only enjoyed at the expense of others, and this is largely because camp’s excess of pleasure... has very little to do with the (un)controlled hedonism of a consumer [; rather,] it is the work of a producer of taste, and ‘taste’ is only possible through exclusion and deprivation” (Ross 16).

*John Waters’ Filthy World of Camp*

In a cultural sense, this exclusive element that Ross describes appears to be a marginal retaliation against hegemonic values. Such a retaliation serves as a backdrop for John Waters’ films because they typically depict storylines that follow characters who would be considered lowly or “trashy” by normative audiences and value filth and infamy instead of wealth and prestige. This reversal of values that are displayed by John Waters creates a space that privileges and embraces marginalized people and excludes those who fit the norm. In fact, what makes Waters’ focus on trash interesting is the idea that it isn’t necessarily exclusive to marginalized communities, because people from all communities produce trash and filth of their own, but is something that only marginalized people can recognize as valuable. The result is an egalitarian discourse that is ironic in the sense that only the culturally monstrous could access it. Moreover, placing a high value onto filth undermines dominant cultures because doing so implies that dominant and marginalized people aren’t very different from each other outside of the socially constructed conventions that separate them. The marginalized are thereby subversively downgrading the dominant cultures because those with higher status don’t want to be equal.

In her discussion of Waters’ use of scatological themes in his movies, with a
primary focus on a scene in *Pink Flamingos* in which Divine actually eats freshly excreted dog feces, Zoe Gross argues that the symbolism behind Waters’ scatology in his films is politically resistive of social hierarchies that deconstruct power dynamics by utilizing the abject nature of filth. Therefore, as Gross states, “it is only in the realm of the official, in the dominant patriarchal order, that this pleasure threatens the ego, placing into crisis law, order and language” because in normative cultures, the scatological is often “associated with chaos, regression, the infantile, and perverse, aberrant sexuality” (19). Furthermore, Gross argues that “the scatological is a conduit for political and ideological resistance” that can serve as an equalizing strategy to raise or lower people of different social standings to the same level, which utilizes a person’s lower social status because it can be used to “subvert from below” so they can “obscure and undermine sites” that privileged individuals take for granted (20). Thus, John Waters’ work is capable of rendering boundaries that separate him from his audience (such as public/private, authentic/inauthentic, reality/fantasy, fictional/biographical). For example, regardless of how outlandish and absurd his storylines and the characters in Waters’ movies may be, they are typically derived from “filthy real-life anecdotes [that are] sometimes just as revolting as those on screen,” which serves as an “extra-filmic” element that negates differences between Waters’ “filthy” fictions and the obscure realities that normative populations ignore (Gross 29). In other words, just as Waters’ use of scatology in his films deconstructs social binaries of gender, sexuality, race, and class, this biographical element in Waters’ work appears to insidiously deconstruct the binary between the spectacles on the screen and his audience of spectators because what most perceive as completely fictive and exaggerated in his films is actually closer to reality
than they’d expect. Therefore, John Waters seems to place his audiences in positions that reflect where his more privileged characters fall in their storylines. He thus shows his audience members that they aren’t as different from the monstrous figures that are featured in his movies.

In *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Harry M. Benshoff connects queerness with Otherness, then links this idea of queer otherness with monstrosity as it is depicted in horror movies that “actively invoke queer readings, because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo” (6). The storytelling elements may call for “depictions of alien ‘Otherness,’ which is often coded (at the site of production and/or reception) as lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer” (6). In this sense, even though John Waters’ films don’t fit into the science fiction or horror genres, the elements of queer hyper-reality and camp in his movies disrupt the heterosexual status quo and the characters who live in this hyper-reality are usually queer, either on or off screen and sometimes in ways that don’t include sexuality, as well as “alien” or Other in the story and to audiences. Benshoff also broadens the scope of “queer” by claiming that “queer is also insistent that issues of race, gender, disability, and class be addressed within its politics” and makes the argument that “as products of a patriarchal culture,” horror and monster movies define what is queer based on the dominant culture’s masculinist bias, which tends to designate anything associated with “woman” or femininity “as the source of the monstrous taint” because queer males are automatically deemed as “monstrous precisely because he embodies characteristics of the feminine, either in outward displays or in the selection of a sexual object choice traditionally reserved for women” (5-6). By
employing the monstrous taint of queerness as a resistive strategy against heteronormativity, Waters depicts a version of queer monstrosity that exists outside of the horror movie, utilizing the phobic intimidation of queer radicalism as a mode of empowerment in his storylines and characters. Thus, as one of the most popular figures who came from the 1970s John Waters era, Divine serves as a catalyst for drag being inherently transgressive and monstrous because Waters’ widening the scope of drag within screen and queer culture emphasized the fact that these things are seen as monstrous, and the embodiment of drag should serve as subversive leverage to empower those who are seen as monstrous.

*The Monstrous White Woman*

Divine is possibly one of the most memorable actors from John Waters’ cinematic simulacrum of filth because even though she was primarily known as the character that Waters’ created, she became more famous outside of John Waters’ films than her original castmates who were Waters’ regulars in his earlier work. With this extra fame, Divine’s monstrous performance continued off-screen. By Benshoff’s definition of queer monstrosity, Divine’s mere homosexuality and gender transgressive performance would already qualify her off-stage or off-screen identity as monstrous, but when John Waters’ element of filth and camp decorate Divine’s fully rounded character(s) in his movies, she becomes a transgressively classed, gendered, sexualized, and even raced white, heterosexual woman who is visibly monstrous, but with queerness that is almost subtextual. Something that contributes to the heterosexuality of the characters that Divine plays is the fact that she is a mother figure in almost all of her roles; however, in Waters’
earlier films, *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, Divine plays a mother who is an outlaw (a thief, murderer, and an abusive parent) who is set on being filthy (with cannibalism, incest, fecal consumption, and her own disfigurement), then plays a character with exaggeratedly matrineal qualities as someone who is neurotic, domestic, agoraphobic, and socially awkward in her later roles, *Polyester* and *Hairspray*, which collectively made Divine monstrously feminine in several different ways. Therefore, Divine’s many depictions of femaleness seem to have played a subversive role in making heterosexuality and whiteness appear monstrous.

Since the only acceptable forms of femininity that existed during Divine’s time was white, upper-class, heterosexual femininity, Divine’s articulation of femininity served as a subversive attack on what society deemed as acceptable. She was white and feminine, but also obviously queer, unconventional looking, and lower-class. In her discussion about drag’s queer articulation of femininity, Carol-Anne Tyler notes the hyper-reality of Divine’s femininity that creates an apparent incongruity from normative performances of ‘female’ femininity. Tyler states that the “excess” of drag’s over-the-top performances and looks “is what prevents drag from being mere inversion” of heteronormative femininity, signifying “a difference from what could be a heterosexual code” of gender performance (55). Furthermore, drag performance’s reinscription of white, middle-class femininity as the real thing “is implicit in the feminist critiques of drag” because it contrasts from what is accepted as a “natural” femininity “whose understated good taste is a sign of the genuine article” (Tyler 57). Tyler further states that “if boys will be girls they had better be ladies” because “a real woman is a real lady; otherwise, she is a female impersonator, a camp or mimic whose ‘unnaturally’ bad taste--
like that of the working-class, ethnic, or racially ‘other’ woman—marks the impersonation as such” (57), which limits “appropriate” femininity only to white, upper-class, heterosexual, and cisgendered women, thereby emphasizing the transgression in Divine’s performance because even though her characters may attempt to ironically mime this ideal femininity, they clearly do not align with acceptable femininity. On the contrary: as a severe contrast to Eltinge’s emphasis on cinching his waist to feminize his masculine form, Divine shows off her inflated waistline and belly that would only be socially acceptable on a male figure. She also dons colorful, form-fitting, mid-drift tops and dresses. Thus, even though Divine plays a heterosexual, white woman in most of her roles, she is still considered monstrous because her body symbolizes unacceptable femininity as a classed and racialized Other.

These racialized and classed elements are most apparent in her role of Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray*. In her article about how Divine’s role as Edna is a racialized figure, Ragan Rhyne argues that Divine’s drag “re-appropriates the body of white women as a challenge to institutionalized racism” because Edna and Tracy Turnblad’s [played by Ricki Lake] “excessive bodies are re-sexualized outside the structures of white supremacy (or almost outside them),” as well as serve as a contrast to “the thin, blonde figures of Velma Von Tussle (Debbie Harry) and her daughter Amber (Colleen Fitzpatrick), both of whom do, in fact, reproduce structures of racism through their bodies” (189-90). Rhyne further contends that when Divine’s fatness becomes a class marker, it “denaturalizes the whiteness implicit in normative femininity” and even reassigns “value to the valueless... through the performance of whiteness, or of ‘white trash’ more specifically” (190) because when that version of whiteness is represented, it
is more difficult to make the white race appear supreme over other races. Rhyne even argues that Divine’s presentation of her robust figure “disrupts codes of femininity as much as, if not more than, her performance of gender and further lays bare the ‘work’ of embodiment of all of these categories” because “if white women are charged with the reproduction of white supremacy[,] then] fat white women bear the burden of embodying the failure and contradiction of white supremacist discourse” (190). Therefore, since camp performances of fat white femininity indicate a version of whiteness that “betrays the conditions of cultural production that render those bodies excessive and in violation of the white supremacist narrative,” Divine’s mere physique challenges the ‘supreme’ value of whiteness (Rhyne 191). In this sense, like the articulation of lower class whiteness (specifically fat, white femininity) appears to foil white supremacist narratives because it also shows that whiteness is flawed. Furthermore, beyond the “masculinization” of larger women, a woman’s curves are also typically exoticized as something that belongs to ethnic and racial Others, which also means that fat, white women must disprove assumptions about what white women’s bodies are or should look like. Therefore, Divine’s monstrous depiction of whiteness provides a greater foil to white supremacy because her race is the only thing that aligns with white supremacist values; otherwise, she is fat, hyper-feminine, lower-class, queer, and on the side of civil rights as Edna Turnblad. Moreover, beyond articulating a strong and socially transgressive female illusion, Divine’s entire persona of embodied monstrous femininity also served as a way to empower herself as a timid and effeminate male when out of drag.

The dual quality of Divine’s drag not only provided an empowered perception of a monstrous female illusion, but also articulated a sense of femininity that a queer man
can embody as an intimidation tactic in a culture that devalues and ridicules male femininity. In their discussion about Divine’s embodied monstrosity, Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick address how Harris Glenn Milstead’s “effeminate way of inhabiting [his surroundings] infuriated people on sight” to the point that “he sometimes needed a police escort merely to get to and from school;” however, when his high school friend, John Waters, equipped Milstead with the power of “Divine,” Milstead quickly “recognized Divine’s affinity with the abject and apotheosized drag heroine of Genet’s Our Lady of the Flowers and at the same time set the seal of a name on Divine’s dangerous and exciting, though far from arbitrary, course of cultivating and valuing his brazen effeminacy as a primary component of his identity” (219). Thus, instead of allowing his effeminacy to continue disempowering him, Milstead learned how the effeminately monstrous cloak of Divine could empower him to express his femininity while also providing shock value that puzzles and scares those who would have normally intimidated him. Furthermore, Moon and Sedgwick explain this by describing how Divine’s fiercely aggressive performance forcibly reminds audiences that drag “is inscribed not just in dress and its associated gender codes but in the body itself [through] habitual and largely unconscious physical and psychological attitudes, poses, and styles of bodily relation and response [because] drag depends on... the already culturalized physical ‘givens’ of the body... that may have near-ineffaceable associations of power or stigma or both” since Divine does not conceal or disavow how dangerous drag can be on- or offstage (215). Therefore, Divine’s hard edge in terms of appearance and character shows how even though she finds empowerment in her drag, this edge is a result of queer and class hardships that she and others in the queer community have faced, and Divine’s
persona was just one of the subversive strategies for dealing with these hardships. This source of feminine empowerment combined with Divine's whiteness appears to illustrate a subversive access to a privilege that Milstead would not be able to approach as a queer male because of his effeminacy, so by embodying the persona of a white woman, Divine can access the next best thing to being white, heterosexual, male, and masculine.

**Divine’s Rhetoric**

Since Divine and John Waters emerged during a time when issues related to gender, sexuality, race, and class were being confronted, which prompted the use of camp in media since it usually plays with different identity categories and people’s feelings about them, they were able to produce directly transgressive rhetoric that Eltinge couldn’t dream of. Therefore, Divine’s transgressive drag aesthetic was almost as monstrous as it was subversive during the political atmosphere of 1970s culture because even though the rhetoric of an overweight and over-the-top drag queen was shocking at the time, the fact that she was white appears to have made her more stomachable to her audience since an equally as shocking drag queen of color at the time would have been even more unheard-of than Divine was to her immediate audience. By embodying an image of an overweight, lower-class, white woman in her performance, Divine was able to illustrate how these kinds of women and, more importantly, these kinds of effeminate men existed under the radar of the 1970s after-school-special media that her and Waters worked against. Furthermore, the portrayal of a white, heterosexual woman allowed Divine a subversive access to privilege and attention that wouldn’t have been granted to him as a queer man, one of the first indications that drag has intersectional qualities that exceed mere gender
expression. Thus, the monstrous quality of Divine’s rhetoric must have opened the doors for drag’s intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, and even body type because, at the time, anyone who transcended these identity categories were considered to be culturally monstrous and subhuman to some extent.

As mentioned above, Waters’ contribution to camp media involved the rhetoric of filth, which established an ironic value system that placed those with less status on top of a new hierarchy while simultaneously equalizing people of different statuses since everybody produces and deals with filth, although at different levels. This equalizing rhetoric in Waters’ use of camp, as well as Divine’s performance of somebody with more social capital than Milstead, seems to involve showing how people who belong to different social categories are capable of being equally as monstrous and ridiculous as the other, but arbitrarily assert their social statuses and compete for different privileges. Therefore, drag’s connection to camp that seems to have been jumpstarted by Waters and Divine shows how different identity categories that are either privileged or devalued could be as arbitrarily assigned and absurdly performed as drag performances seem.

**Evita Bezuidenhout: Drag as Political Subversion**

The third and final drag rhetor that I’m going to address in this chapter is Pieter-Dirk Uys’ drag persona, Evita Bezuidenhout. In a Stephen Colbertian fashion, Uys created an ironic characterization of an oblivious, crass, and racist white woman who supports apartheid in South Africa during the racist regime’s final years. When explaining his subversive strategy of addressing South African politicians in Julian Shaw’s documentary, *Darling! The Pieter-Dirk Uys Story*, Uys says, “I got the
Publications Act and learned it so well that I knew exactly where all the pitfalls were and I would trap them with their own law because they didn’t know their law and that’s the one thing I learned about politicians, they don’t know their own job.” By echoing the politicians’ faulty and sometimes hypocritical logic—logic that justified Apartheid—Evita showed them to be similarly oblivious, crass, and racist. Evita also represented a motherly figure who expressed real concerns with her audience and, even in her blunt kind of way, offered guidance for how to cope with the change of post-apartheid life.

Senelick claims that “Evita’s political incorrectness was a direct reflection of the closed society in which she thrived,” where she was free to demonstrate her privilege by unabashedly regurgitating “prejudices and principles in which South Africa was grounded” because “Evita avoid[ed] vitriol and capitalize[ed] on charm, dignity and plausibility” (475). By effectively embodying such a privileged character, Uys was able to subversively escalate his own status as an effeminate man to the status of a rich, heterosexual, white woman with a plausible attitude and strong opinions that can’t be attacked or ignored the way they would be if they were articulated by Uys himself.

_A Part Uys, Apartheid Realness_

Pieter-Dirk Uys, the man underneath Evita, was born, raised, and eventually began his professional life as a columnist in Gauteng province’s capital, Johannesburg (Brunstein 182). As “the offspring of an Afrikaner father and a German-Jewish mother,” Uys was exposed to multiculturalism and intersectionality from the outset. In the 1970s, Uys became an actor and playwright who, as Laurence Senelick remarks, was referred to as a “cuckoo in the nest” and “a young man of suicidal impulsiveness” (475), presumably
because of his effeminate mannerisms and risque sense of humor.

After the 1976 student riots took place in Soweto and South Africa’s National Party withheld “all reports of the violence and resistance that increasingly gripped the country” (196), Uys decided to start an ironic “insider’s gossip column” for the *Sunday Express* under the pseudonym of “Evita Bezuidenhout.” He eventually “began to appear in news photos as Mrs. Bezuidenhout” as he commented on current events, a move that Senelick calls “particularly daring” because public transvestism and cross-dressing was illegal at the time (475). Uys also began developing a voice, mannerisms, and full-fledged personality for Evita by having her appear on stage and at public events with the same level of pleasant, yet comical crassness.

Throughout the 1980s, Uys also began equipping Evita with a background story. She was “the widow of a Nationalist MP and a former Ambassador to a mythical land called Bapetikosweti” (Brunstein 182) and later a mother and grandmother of biracial children. Evita eventually became popular as if she were a real South African socialite. In fact, from defying censors and even receiving death threats, Evita became “a national celebrity, the most famous white woman in South Africa, and better known than most Afrikaner politicians” (Senelick 477). She eventually became a “hostess of a phenomenally popular TV show, *Evita’s Funigalore*, [where] she became the court jester to the RDP government and Queen Mother to a nation in the throes of change,” and drove a “pink Cadillac convertible [that] enjoyed diplomatic immunity with the police when it breached speed limits” (Senelick 477).

In an interview with Daniel Lieberfeld, Uys explains South African politicians’ willingness to appear with a drag queen on a talk show by saying:
I’m not a man in drag. Believe me, if it was a man in drag they wouldn’t do it. And if my job was to be a man in drag, I wouldn’t have asked them. That’s why gender is so interesting… I find that when I do Evita, I have to do her totally for real. I’ve got to take every hair off my arm, because if anybody sees that fluff, I’ve lost it. I mean, she is not about balloons. She’s not absurd. She’s so real that women recognize the femininity in her, and men forget that there’s a guy inside. (62)

In his response, Uys addresses how even though it is known that he is a drag queen when he’s Evita, his illusion has to be so convincing in such delicate circumstances that it has to diminish any doubt about her being who she says she is, which clearly exceeds the mere novelty that she started with and that drag has been recognized as. Further, something that seems to prevent Evita’s potential interlocutors from avoiding her is the fact that she is absurd, but no more absurd than any other interlocutor (politician or otherwise) that these people would interact with because she is well-informed about government and appears agreeable, which then makes the only thing absurd about her the fact that she’s a drag queen, but that is where her impeccable female illusion and performance come into play. Evita’s believable performance as a right-winged woman also took part in the overall illusion because that was even what prevented the censors from spotting her back when she only existed in the column and translated to her stage performances. Her ironic political stance that fit in with the rest of her persona is where Uys’ use of his own white femininity to create Evita troubled ideologies of gender and whiteness.

With this access to privilege that soon became excessive through Evita’s flaunting
of it, Uys was able to show how much obnoxiously rich, white people could get away with while law enforcement kept their eyes on those with less privilege. Beyond just using the satire of excess and decadence to make a point about white privilege, Uys also used comedy to make the burden of living in such a repressed society more livable.

*Evita’s Rhetoric*

Even though Evita emerged slightly after Divine in the late 1970s in Uys’ column and was based in a more culturally repressed environment, both of these drag queens stood for equality and articulated equalizing messages that emphasized how absurd social hierarchies could be because everybody involved, in the end, are people regardless of how they look or where they fall in the hierarchy. Similar to Divine, Uys rhetorically used his whiteness in drag by creating a character with more social capital than the queer man underneath, thereby troubling markers such as gender, sexuality, class, and race and ultimately challenging white supremacy. Furthermore, the subversive appeal of Evita and Divine seems to come from their commentary about the incongruous importance of heteronormative scripts that oppress queer men because they show that if a drag queen can “go against the grain” of how a man is supposed to act, while simultaneously gaining respect from audiences and not enduring any harsh consequences, then the rigid scripts of normative performance are deemed pointless. Even though Evita’s visual aesthetic was not as abrasive as Divine’s, Evita takes her transgressive subversion further than Divine not only because she did drag when it was still illegal in South Africa while confronting those who implemented laws, but she also brought drag outside of the safety net of visual media to confront these lawmakers on normally uncharted territories for drag queens.
In April Sizemore-Barber’s discussion of Uys’ queer bridgings of gender and race, she claims that Evita’s drag not only troubled strict divisions between genders, but also managed to queer “the signifying power of whiteness” because her “ability to transgress numerous post-apartheid spaces destabilized the naturalness of racial and gender categories” in her performances (200). In his explanation of Evita’s status, Senelick draws a parallel between wealthy, white Afrikaner women and American Southern belles by claiming that they were both venerated in their respective cultures, which allows Uys to simultaneously “besmirch that image and become invulnerable behind it” (475). Therefore, to prosecute Evita whenever she did something controversial, it “would not only look absurd” by showing that a drag queen had the power to ‘rattle the cages’ of such highly regarded political structures, but it would also “seem to be an assault on Boer womanhood” (Senelick 475). Thus, by aligning Evita with rightest beliefs in an ignorantly idiotic fashion, Uys is able to play with ideologies of privilege while undermining prejudices. Even though Uys is effeminate and queer, his being white was key to his performance and success because Evita’s performance coming from a black person would have been unheard of and quickly silenced by white supremacists.

**Aligned with the Status-Quo, Under the Radar**

Brunstein makes the case that even though Evita belongs in the same canon that such drag queens as “Dame Edna, Quentin Crisp, and the like” find themselves in, “Evita is almost exclusively political” in her satire when the other drag queens’ punchlines tend to be rooted in gender and sexuality (185). By adopting the persona of Evita, Uys was empowered but also protected as he set out to confront and embarrass political figures. In
her discussion of political drag performances during South African apartheid, Sizemore-Barber claims that Evita appeared on Sunday Express as Uys’ effort to address contentious issues while remaining ‘under the radar’ as sheer entertainment in order to avoid losing his job because South African press was prohibited from reporting political issues. Senelick explains that to Evita’s alert readers, her “form of satirical attack” was interpreted “as a liberal’s condemnation” (475); however, her less alert readers were compelled to either agree with her absurd views or disregard her as sheer entertainment.

Aside from being a sheer spectacle, Evita’s popularity primarily seemed to come from her ability to make such a dark period in South African history something that her and audiences could laugh at together. In response to Lieberfeld’s question about how Uys dealt with censorship and intimidation as a political satirist during apartheid, Uys states that “humor was the key. Humor was the way to do it--to laugh at my fear, and then find out that people share the same fears” (64) and “not taking it seriously, [since apartheid] was so serious you couldn’t even think about it” (65). Thus, it appears that Uys utilized the dichotomy between “serious” and “unserious” to his advantage because Evita often satirized very contentious social issues and executed an almost believable female illusion, but whenever she came close to being attacked for being confrontational, she would remind her audiences that she is still a drag queen who shouldn’t be taken seriously. Uys explains how the Evita character provided a security blanket for him by saying that “every time I was really in trouble, I’d get her on the front page of a newspaper wearing some funny hat and looking like an idiot, and everyone would go, ‘Oh Christ, the drag queen’s at it again. Let’s move on. It’s not worth pursuing’” (Lieberfeld 64-5). Evita’s believable performance of elevated status and privilege
equipped Uys with a ‘coat of armour’ that granted him immunity to say and do almost anything he wanted because he made a spectacle of himself. Senelick remarks that “Evita’s outfits were extreme” because “she was often photographed wearing the entire remains of an endangered species” (477), which was a strategy that Uys used to further emphasize how obnoxious and oblivious this character really is.

Since Evita was able to use the spectacular aesthetic of being a drag performer as a subversive rhetorical strategy, women might assume that she is making a mockery of them; however, when Lieberfeld addresses this concern, Uys answers that a lot of South African women are supportive of him “because Evita represents something that Afrikaans women have not been allowed—a political voice. Evita’s a very strong female clown. Most women have not been allowed that voice in politics” (63). This response from Afrikaans women seems to show how Uys’ intentions and modes of subversion are understood and that having any kind of feminine perspective, whether from a woman or a drag queen, must be a good start towards women having their rights. Then as the post-apartheid Afrikaner life began to set in, the spectacle that Evita was remained, but like the political structure of her nation, she gradually evolved in front of her audience. This evolved Evita gave the audience that previously shared her concerns an example of how to live in an environment that no longer made her and other white Afrikaners supreme over black people.

**The Magical and Cunning White Woman**

Another one of Evita’s strategy in destabilizing without completely disrupting the system that she critiqued involves assuming “the role of the jester as truth-teller,” as
Sizemore-Barber suggests, because “clowns have historically operated in the realm of the satirical, over-playing the social hierarchies only to reveal their absurdity” (200). Sizemore-Barber’s connection between Evita and clowns not only highlights the exaggerated silliness of drag, but the reality that things aren’t always what they seem, and even if it is easy to underestimate the clown, that underestimation makes it easier for the clown to trick audience members because it means that somebody let his or her guard down. Therefore, Evita’s “immaculately coiffed hair[,] makeup[,] and Uys’s total commitment to making her real, both onstage and in public spaces” is strategic in that it helps him create a “real person with a history whose supposed gentility and believability only underscores the banality of apartheid’s evil” (Sizemore-Barber 200). By creating such a believable illusion of a charismatic, white woman, Uys is able to disarm his audiences to illustrate that if they were convinced by his performance even though everybody knows that he’s a drag queen, they might have been fooled by other political and social constructs as well. Thus, in order for a drag performer to inflict such category crises without facing social backlash, the comic relief from being a public spectacle has to be included.

Aside from being comedic for sheer entertainment, Evita had to be strategic in her comedy in order for it to bypass censors, yet put political hypocrisy in its place, which resembles *metis*, the calculating Greek myth. In his discussion that connects *Metis* to Hélène Cixous’ Medusa and Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza, all rhetorical symbols that represent some kind of feminine embodiment, Jay Dolmage claims that “*metis* means wisdom, wise counsel—but it also means cunning and connotes trickery... [and] is enacted as flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, cleverness, opportunism, and
experience” (7). Furthermore, similar to how Evita addresses harsh truths in her satire, *metis* also involves describing the real world with “persuasion, differentiation, shifting contexts, and meaningful bodies” (Dolmage 8). Since this myth is based on the Oceanid goddess with subversive traits that are rather feminine, it connects with Uys’ strategy of using Evita because she is a feminine coat of armor who can get away with more than Uys because of her cunning wit. Evita uses a rhetorical strategy that is wise and cunning because, like any clown or court jester, she plays the part of an outlandish buffoon who doesn’t know or believe in what she’s saying when she mimics things that real rightest women and political leaders say to disarm audiences, then says something quick-witted that’s actually on her mind once interlocutors have their guards down.

**Evita Without Her Nemesis**

Although Uys originally developed Evita “as a satirical reflection of white privilege and complicity” during an oppressive time in desperate need of comic relief, after apartheid the more-evolved Evita began playing “a participatory role in the transition to democracy and the earliest years of the post-apartheid dispensation” (Sizemore-Barber 192). Sizemore-Barber explains how Evita’s influence as a post-apartheid public figure who addressed “the frisson between drag transformation and transformational politics” was so well-respected that she “received an official parliamentary send off” from the politicians who were reconstructing post-apartheid South Africa (192).

The end of apartheid did not signal the end of Evita or her political satire. In fact, Senelick claims that Evita “had always been a symbol of white survival, [by] changing
not her tune but the words she sang to it” (477). In August 1992, Evita changed the format of her regular one-man show by opening herself up for questions from audiences members, questions “that reflected a real anxiety in the face of change, and her answers were blunt, but witty” because in her own forum to speak, she was pretty much “licensed to utter in public what” Uys would never be allowed to say, nor even think to say, out of drag, which made her free “to express, in this liminal context, emotions and reactions” that would otherwise be suppressed (Senelick 477). Even though the death of apartheid was a step towards racial equality in South Africa, a direction that Uys and other activists wanted to go in, apartheid was a reality that Uys and most of his audience were familiar with, which gave this transition into democracy growing pains for everybody involved.

When Evita didn’t have politicians to confront, she continued character-building and being a grandmother. In Brustein’s description of Evita’s post-apartheid performances and identity, he writes that Evita’s “political afterlife consisted in doling out homliness and recipes, doting over her three black grand children, and dispensing latent racist sentiments with generous helpings of liberal hypocrisy” (182-3). This change that Brustein describes appears to show a gradual shift in Evita’s progressiveness that is thought to be a realistic representation of the shift that white Afrikaners’ must have been experiencing since this drastic change in politics obviously did not result in immediate shifts in racist social institutions. Furthermore, in Evita’s show, after saying that “her conscious was clear” about apartheid because she “never practiced it,” Brustein states that “as proof of her dedication to the continuation of the African races, Evita brings on stage her three black grandchildren” (185). Regardless of her conflicting emotions of feeling both blessed and ashamed of her grandchildren, Evita looks at them “with
grandmotherly pride as they sweetly warble a ditty *a capella,*” which is a brief moment where Brustein claims that “all the confusions, contradictions, dangers, and possibilities of post-apartheid South Africa come into clear focus” (185). Brustein explains this epiphany as a realization of the kinds of conflicts that occupy South Africa’s “painful struggle towards free nationhood for all” because Evita’s adaptation “to the new imperatives without sacrificing her old privileges” resembles what people like Evita must have been going through (185). Brustein’s observation of Evita’s show reveals how even though social prejudices are deplorable, they are also institutionalized into the people who have them, which makes phasing out of fascist regimes a complicated process. Since racism is dehumanizing of racial Others, it is easy to dehumanize those who are racist; however, Evita appears to articulate that racism and conflicting emotions are only natural for Afrikaners coming out from the fresh wound of apartheid, but like most wounds, it will eventually heal for the better.

Indeed, Evita reminds her audience that their experiences are normal and even demonstrates how other Afrikaners can move on from apartheid. Sizemore-Barber addresses how Evita’s social status shifted from being an “ultimate insider” as a Member of Parliament’s wife during apartheid, to an “ostensibly disempowered minority” in her post-apartheid life (200). Since Evita, along with many of her white audience members “did not know how to be white without the framing context of apartheid,” one of her struggles after the fascist regime included a “personal crisis of racial definition” where Evita realized “that she is not white, and cannot be white when ‘whiteness’ means denying the humanity of her” biracial grandchildren (Sizemore-Barber 197). Once again, Evita normalized these feelings of disempowerment and white guilt as mere phases of the
process in moving forward, as well as used comedy the make this process easier.

Sizemore-Barber argues that although Evita was empathetic, instead of dwelling on the melancholic past and lost privileges, Uys’ “performances used humor to move his audience through the loss to a hopeful vision of the future” (199). Therefore, Evita’s approach to living in South Africa with democracy not only humanized citizens who were labeled as either ‘racial enemies’ or ‘racist enemies’ gave white people a chance “to rehumanize a much more insidious enemy: fear and racism in themselves” (199). Moreover, the ‘realness’ of Evita’s latter performances of a privileged post-fascist perspective not only humanizes those who were thought of as enemies, but depicts a realistic expectation of the time and work it takes for a culture to adjust to political structures that contradict what was previously believed under apartheid.

**Conclusion**

Even though Evita’s story is fictive, while comically reflecting real-world issues, as Divine did, her notoriety differs from Divine because her presence did not merely exist within the context of an absurdly fictional premise since Evita primarily made the real world that she lived in seem absurd. By having a background story and family that changed with the times and making appearances at political occasions that transcended the stage and screen, Uys broke new ground for drag with his absolute commitment to his persona that added a third-dimension to drag performance, which has not been accomplished before Evita because until she emerged, the show typically ended for queens when the camera stopped recording and the curtains fell. Since Uys kept the show going on and off stage, similar to how Eltinge performed off stage as a manly man, he
created a public persona that was approachable and relatable to audiences, which contributed to his and Eltinge’s overall success as rhetors even though they connected with audiences for different reasons since Eltinge had to frame his publicity in a way that made audiences comfortable with him, while Evita seemed more genuine because she actually shared concerns with her audience. Beyond Uys turning Evita into something that was recognized as a real person, he also established that drag is capable of accomplishing more than just entertaining because he used the the formula that already existed for drag queens (such as cross dressing, subversive comedy, and establishing a larger-than-life look and attitude) and applied it to political activism.

Even though queening started as what seemed to be mere mimicry of an “opposite” gender, it eventually developed its own conventions and enriched into something that represented more that was going on in culture than issues that were limited to gender and sexuality. As something that grew and aligned with cultural perspectives that were addressed and satirized in camp media, drag eventually developed a more fantastical aesthetic that brought the glitz of celebrity and stardom that existed within screen cultures into reality. Since mass media and popular culture reached greater heights as the twentieth century progressed, this aesthetic of fantasy escalated and even expanded into reflections of popular countercultures that emerged, which might not have been as glamorous as earlier drag queens, but had a postmodernist irony that reflected earlier drag rhetoric’s subversion. In fact, subversiveness appears to be the part of what eventually became standard in drag once the articulation of it broadened and accumulated more cultural nuances.

As I briefly alluded to above in each section, drag performance always involved
an accumulation of cultural elements that exceeded gender and sexuality because any kind of enactment of gender or sexuality must involve elements related to race, class, region, age, etc. and drag isn’t any different; however, sociopolitical interventions and the emergence of intersectional theories that emerged over the century began fairly recent conversations about drag rhetoric’s intersectionality. The mere recognition of gay and queer culture eventually brought forth some aspects of lived intersectional issues, then as drag expanded into different forms of queening or even kining (female-to-male drag), or doing same-gender drag, intersectional elements became more prominent in actual drag performances because the initial forms of drag must have opened the door for different ways of subverting identity politics. A direct influence on drag’s popularization and the establishment of standards for queening was the 2009 premiere of the competition reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* because it reached wider audiences every time a new season came out, which exposed audiences primarily to RuPaul’s form of queening, as well as inspired a broader acceptance of drag. This broader acceptance of drag eventually gave room for broader perspectives of drag to an extent because different kinds of drag queens were given opportunities to provide foils to standard queening once queening in general became more popular. Bearded queening, for example, not only problematizes the standard drag aesthetic that is featured in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* or general gendered performance, but politicizes the queer male body that is caught between symbolisms of masculinity and femininity for having facial and body hair that is only socially acceptable on male-performing bodies and not women or drag queens.

Bodies are inherently political and drag is transgressive because it troubles the politics that most people can actually control for themselves, while agitating people who
want supreme control over other people’s bodies and what they represent. Regardless of how the actions that people take on their own bodies should only affect the individual, things like sexual promiscuity, abortion, sodomy, and even the way that people choose to present themselves remain contentious to others. Therefore, drag rhetoric represents a loss of that societal control because even during Eltinge’s time, drag indicated queerness, and actually shows a refusal to comply with rigid standards for how one can dress and use their bodies. As observed in Evita and Eltinge, part of drag’s message became about creating illusions that are so convincing to audiences that they have to be reminded that they were being lured into a seductive trap. Unlike those with power who actually want to fool audiences to scam them out of something, drag performances like Evita’s seem to reflect critical thinking exercises that keep audiences alert about things that are alluring to them because they can just as easily be as fake as the feminine illusion that is right in front of them.
4. INTERSECTING THE CULTURAL STANDARD: EXAMINING HOW CONTEMPORARY DRAG RHETORIC’S INTERSECTIONALITY SUBVERTS IDENTITY CATEGORIES

WHY DRAG? The glib answer is, “Why not?” I could say that it is about challenging societal gender norms, except that is complete bullshit as I don’t care about such things.

Once upon a time, I did it to feel special and impress. But now I do it to amuse myself.

-Mathu Andersen

Queening in the conventional sense has become known as a queer medium that articulates femininity in a way that it has been represented by women in popular culture, particularly camp media, which makes the fantasy of ‘woman’ a reality. In Daniel Harris’ discussion about drag’s aesthetic, he states that due to the media influence of the 20th century, drag became less about a mere imitation of ‘woman,’ and more of “an imitation of the woman, the star, the Mae Wests, Judy Garlands, and Marilyn Monroes whose glamorous auras as legendary icons have been incorporated into the aesthetic of drag” (66). In other words, standard queening follows traditional scripts of gender as depicted in media by popular, feminine figures.

Deviations from conventional drag rhetoric, such as bearded queening or articulations of “boy drag,” appear to not only subvert heteronormative standards of identity performance, but the standards of drag that were set by the queens who were discussed in Chapter Two and popularized by the hit competition reality show RuPaul’s Drag Race (RPDR). After being on the air for almost a decade, this show has brought
drag into the mainstream and contributes a great deal to how drag is understood and discussed by contemporary audiences; however, *RPDR*’s focus that is limited to conventional queening has standardized popular drag to an aesthetic that reflects RuPaul’s. With a standardized drag aesthetic in place, unconventional forms of drag that emerged in the competition reality show have been disparaged by judges, then eventually accepted in later seasons, which shows how even spaces designated for drag queens are slow to accept difference and new subversions.

Yet, Jose Muñoz argues that even though “woman” is performed in conventional queening, “one would be naive and deeply ensconced in heteronormative culture to consider such a performance, no matter how ‘real,’ as an actual performance of ‘woman’” (108). Muñoz explains that “femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women” (108), which is how drag queens are able to articulate a version of femininity that does not explicitly indicate that they are performing as women in the cisgendered sense. For example, even though Julian Eltinge’s performance disidentified from both conventional heteronormativity and the Progressive era’s cross-dressing community, which removed all visible queerness that could have been attributed to him regardless of how believably “woman” his performance was considered during that time, his articulation of femininity would be considered drag by Muñoz’s and Harris’ standards because his dramatic look and demeanor still managed to stand out from the female performers who accompanied him. In Eltinge’s appearance on *The Voice of Hollywood* in 1929, he and his co-performers are all wearing feathers and frills; however, Eltinge’s larger frame along with his extra-frilly gown and a feathered headdress that stood about a foot over his head, “ate up the stage” and showed an articulation of drag that probably
wasn’t recognized as such during the 1920s because the term has had such a rigid meaning. Moreover, any performance of gender and sexuality involves various cultural intersections, which make any type of drag performance a complex bricolage of different cultures that are shown through a queer lens.

Therefore, in this chapter I will argue that even though drag rhetoric has evolved into something that is more intersectional, which makes it broader than mere camp remediations of gender, it has kept its intrinsic subversiveness and transgressiveness to the point that it even subverts standardized queening. In order to make this case, I am going to address *RPDR*’s season eight contestant Thorgy Thor’s Michael Jackson, boy drag impersonation because it troubles gendered, racial, and sexual incongruities of Jackson’s persona, as well as showcases a change in *RPDR*’s validation that this performance was acceptable queening in their standards. I am also going to discuss bearded/genderfuck queening, another form of drag that was first disparaged on *RPDR* then accepted in a later season, because it is a drag aesthetic that directly confronts the incongruous concepts that deem bearded women freakish since it is not only accepted, but preferable for men to be hairy, while hairy women are demonized and fetished.

**Queening the Intersection: Applying “Mestiza Consciousness” and Intersectional Theory to Drag Rhetoric**

As addressed in my discussion about Divine, her performance signaled a classed and racialized Other during the 1960s and 1970s, which showed an early iteration of drag’s intersectionality. Another iteration from an actual racialized Other who showed drag’s intersectional qualities at about the same time as Divine is Crystal LaBeija. In the
“Mother Has Arrived!” episode of Drag HerStory. Jaymes Mansfield addresses how drag pageants were one of the few racially integrated events that was documented in the 1960s in her discussion about LaBeija, a black contestant that was featured in Frank Simon’s 1968 documentary The Queen. However, Mansfield claims that during this time, drag queens of color would make themselves lighter in complexion to be more comparable to their white opponents, which shows early iterations of race performance in drag. This racial dynamic within the drag community also sets the stage for how race factored into the New York ballroom scene that’s featured in Jennie Livingston’s Paris is Burning (1990) because ballrooms served as a countercultural space for drag queens of color. The latter documentary focuses on the economic and social struggles that gay and trans participants of the ballroom culture faced during the late 1980s, nearly twenty years after The Queen. Today, contemporary forms of queening continue to branch off into drag countercultures, as well as play with gendered and racial lines as long as there are ways of troubling the human form with makeup, wigs, and clothing; however, RuPaul’s signature style of queening still reflects LaBeija’s feminine illusion of a white pageant contestant, showing how even though drag has evolved, it continues to follow certain hegemonic conventions.

The people underneath the trinkets and manipulations of gendered symbolism that encompass this drag aesthetic often experience different privileges and oppressions that come from the cultural intersections of their identities. As indicated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sumi Cho, and Leslie McCall in their article, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” intersectional theory helps to “reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and
deployment of overlapping identity categories” since people experience life sometimes through discrimination and sometimes through benefits (797). These authors argue that since intersectionality is inextricably linked to an analysis of power dynamics between oppressed and privileged groups, “the intersectional analysis... emphasizes political and structural inequalities” (Crenshaw, Cho, & McCall 797). Crenshaw, Cho, and McCall are addressing the complexity of institutionalized exterior privileging of certain identities over others that relates to the complexity of drag because even though drag queens are primarily male-identifying on the surface, which grants most of them male privilege over the women they allude to, the majority of drag queens don’t have heterosexual, masculine, or sometimes even cis privilege. As intersections within drag communities are broken down even further, elements of race, socioeconomic status, ability, and age factor into their lack of social capital within the sexual and gendered realms of their identities. Beyond the intersectional qualities that drag queens live with when they are out of drag, contemporary drag performances often emphasize gendered, sexual, and racial incongruities in heteronormative culture that appear to exist “under the radar.”

The concept of queerness as a whole, which includes gender, sexual, as well as racial fluidity, is central to Anzaldúa’s border theory. After conceptualizing a “healing split” between colored and white races, Gloria Anzaldúa contends that “as a mestiza, I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all counties are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races” (102). She expands this idea by arguing that her feminism has deemed her cultureless because she challenges, or even queers, traditional societal constructs while simultaneously creating a new culture
that explains “the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (Anzaldúa 103). Anzaldúa’s notion that having a queer identity links her to women, as well as queer people, of all races shows that her own Chicanx identity is not the only link between her own race and other races. Further, it might even be the case that Anzaldúa is arguing that social divisions of race are a heteronormative construct, which would make the social privileging of race that exists within queer communities an effect of the heterosexual’s doing.

In a world that doesn’t seem to appreciate ambiguity and imposes strict social categories onto people, the unifying queer aspect of “mestiza consciousness” appears to reverse those impositions by forcing the majority to tolerate cultural ambiguities. In the introduction to Gloria Anzaldúa’s fourth edition of Borderlands/La Frontera: La Nueva Mestiza, Norma E. Cantú and Aida Hurtado claimed that Anzaldúa’s theory helped her readers understand how people approach certain incongruities “between their private self-perceptions (say, as competent, intelligent, logical individuals) and others’ negative perceptions of them. Anzaldúa proposes that one possibility among many is to use the contradiction to one’s advantage and rise above the negative assignation to develop a complex view of the social self” (8). Therefore, it is possible that Michael Jackson rhetorically used the social incongruities that were socially attributed to him to his advantage in a way that Cantú and Hurtado describe, since his actual work as a musical artist was known for communicating messages of racial and gender fluidity. In fact, even if Jackson did not intentionally use his own social contradictions to his advantage, Thorgy Thor’s impersonation of him might have been a way of pointing out the
incongruities of the public perceptions that were projected onto Jackson. One of these incongruities could be the fact that even though Jackson’s artistic messages of gender and racial fluidity might have been ahead of their time, they were presumably well-received by his audience; however, the demonstrations of similar messages in Jackson’s life became the target for his public ridicule. Therefore, a drag impersonation of Michael Jackson could be a rhetorical demonstration that does not only point out Jackson’s and Thor’s contradictions with gender and race, but it could also be a way of pointing out the mixed messages that the public communicated to Jackson (Did they want a more accepting world that reflects what has been communicated in Jackson’s music? Or did they want to remain rigid and cruel towards people they don’t understand?). Thor’s impersonation also might have been a way of challenging particular incongruities for a competition reality show that is focused on gender performance.

As a rhetorical medium that is known for using its own obvious artifice and incongruous performance of identity to ironically critique societal inconsistencies that are faced in reality, contemporary drag queens have evolved their performances from mere gender troublings to troubling other lived and/or fictive identity categories to emphasize what Sherry Velasco refers to as “cultural anxieties inspired by the fluidity of sexual identities” (189), which reflects the embracing of ambiguity that Cantú and Hurtado address about “mestiza consciousness.” In fact, the “genderfuck” drag queens in Sarah Hankins’ ethnography utilize freakish allusions to provide social commentary about deeply rooted dynamics between people with social capital and the people that they fetishize and exploit. Hankins claims that this genderfuck group “represents ‘male’ and ‘female’ as deeply unstable signifiers... suggesting that money may circulate according to
the logic of a structure more complex than gender alone” (454) because queens in this group “collect tips from audiences via an array of intentionally uncomfortable haptic and proximate exchanges” in ways that allow participants to “internalize, at a sensory, bodily level, experiences of dehumanization and subalternity” (456). An example of these more complex drag performances that Hankins provides includes Johnny Blazes, whom she describes as a queen with a “staggering zombie-style [strut] down Jacques’ catwalk to the strains of Britney Spears’ 2007 ‘Piece of Me,’” where ze tosses actual pieces of hirself into her audience—“a scrap of bloodied gown with a bit of flesh attached”—and collects her expected tips in exchange, which is a transaction that Hankins calls an equal exchange because these currencies are “both fetish(izable) objects” (456). Another example of Hankins’ definition of genderfuck drag occurs when black drag queens “excruciatingly reenact” U.S. chattel slavery by assuming “postures of abjection [that involve] begging to be spanked or insulted, only to turn on their abusers” by insisting that their audience members hand over tips, which usually influence “a mixture of enthusiasm, embarrassment, and, perhaps, some irritation at being made to perform the slaver role” and financial enabler (456). Thus, Hankins connects this seemingly violated and tainted monetary transaction between genderfuck queens and their audiences with the exploitative, dehumanizing treatment that more privileged individuals do with people that they think of as lesser, yet find them amusing, because “we tip animals, monsters, and hyperracialized bodies” (456). Hankins defines the genderfuck performance as a subversive platform for highlighting contentious topics that need to be problematized not only for the sake of shock value and making audience members uncomfortable, but also to address realities that are too complex to be articulated through conventional drag.
Indeed, Hankins explains that “genderfuck is itself a commentary on the dynamics of dehumanization, on the ease with which the social psyche can move between ‘animal’ and ‘nonwhite body’” (456) because genderfuck drag “foregrounds tropes of primitivism and degeneracy as tools of protest and liberation,” not necessarily to exploit deviant sexuality or “trick audiences into behaving like racists,” but make them “understand the symbolic logics that unify and undergird such structures at their most occult levels” so they would be able to consciously opt out of hegemonic sociosexual economic structures (Hankins 457). By using metaphors and symbols that exceed the scope of social realities that are highlighted in conventional drag (primarily gender and sexuality with subtle class and race-related contexts), genderfuck further complicates the body and how it symbolically functions as human, emphasizing darker and dehumanizing contexts related to gender, sexuality, class, and race, and even adding elements of disability (something even more deeply rooted and ignored by society). The themes of dehumanization that Hankins remarks on in these performances almost directly resemble a queer remediation of nineteenth century freak shows; however, Hankins’ definition of genderfuck drag does not seem to include bearded drag queens even though their aesthetic appears to allude to the bearded women who were featured in freak shows, as well as share similar symbolism with the queens in her study. Beyond the overt messages of abjedion in Hankins’ study, the social commentary in bearded drag is rooted in cultural incongruities that aren’t as fictive because bearded drag queens typically combine their masculine physical attributes with elements of femininity, thus creating an aesthetic that doesn’t align with normative masculinity, femininity, or even conventional queening.
Queening the King of Pop: An Examination of Thorgy Thor’s Border-Crossing Michael Jackson Impersonation

With the exception of black face, the notion that it is considered acceptable for drag to include race performance seems to call attention to the nuanced cultural intersections that drag performance is capable of highlighting aside from just gender and sexuality. Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorizing of a “mestiza consciousness,” drag seems to have been a “third element” of a new cultural philosophy that challenges boundaries of identification by filling the “split” between male and female; however, a similarity between Thorgy Thor’s Michael Jackson impersonation and Anzaldúa’s theory appears to fill the “split” between whiteness and races of color as well (102). The queer racelessness that Anzaldúa proposes in her theory must be the unifying factor that makes the performance of race in a drag context acceptable because like women, queer people come from all races, but unlike women, a part of queer culture involves creating multiracial communities outside of the biological family because queer people of any race are often rejected by their families. Therefore, Thorgy Thor’s characterization of such a racially complicated figure, Michael Jackson, seems to not only illustrate drag’s focus on big characters regardless of race or gender, but also incorporates the idea of queer unity in Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” because they both use queerness to challenge the borders between race and gender.

A RuPaul’s Drag Race Celebrity Impersonation that Crossed Many Boundaries

Michael Jackson is a pop culture icon whose celebrity persona contains several liminal facets, which seemed to be the punchline for his public ridicule that included
countless impersonations of his androgynous, racially ambiguous appearance, as well as his effeminate personality. One of the most recent Michael Jackson impersonations, however, was done by RuPaul’s Drag Race season eight contestant, Thorgy Thor, who did a boy-drag impersonation of Jackson in the “Snatch Game” episode and landed in the top three for the challenge. The “Snatch Game” is RuPaul’s Drag Race’s parody of NBC’s fill-in-the-blank game show, Match Game, where Drag Race contestants have to perform comical impersonations of celebrities as game show contestants. Since Thor’s performance as a queer white man impersonating a non-queer identifying black man was well-received in a drag competition reality show, ideas of both race and gender performance in drag have been problematized because to consider this performance cultural appropriation would carry the assumption that Jackson’s identity clearly fits into particular social categories when they didn’t. Furthermore, Thorgy’s validation for doing boy drag on RuPaul’s Drag Race, a space where performing anything other than standard male-to-female queening has been rejected in previous seasons, shows how even contexts for drag rhetoric initially experience “cultural anxieties” from difference, but eventually grow to accept these differences.

An implicit rule of thumb that seems to be in place for race performance in drag has been to avoid perpetuating stereotypes that would include using techniques like black face, and focusing the impersonation particularly on easily identifiable character traits that the impersonated person has instead. For example, when season five contestant Alaska Thunderfvck borrowed a black contestant’s dark foundation to impersonate a season four Latina contestant, Phi Phi O’Hara, for a challenge that involved reenactments of moments from previous RuPaul’s Drag Race seasons, the primary reason behind
Thunderfvck’s makeup choice was to address O’Hara’s character, not her race. Even though Alaska’s makeup resembled black face, or in this case “brown face” since she is a white drag queen impersonating a dark-skinned Latina, the rationale behind Alaska’s decision to use such dark makeup was to imitate Phi Phi’s excessive use of bronzer that gave her skin an orange tint, which illustrates a focus on Phiphi’s character choice to overuse bronzer and not necessarily her skin color as a Latina. Further, Alaska Thunderfvck also imitated other aspects of Phi Phi O’Hara’s character by gluing on a ‘wonky’ eyelash, as well as mocking her pageant style of makeup and volatile personality. In this particular impersonation, O’Hara as a Latina/queer male/drag queen is a big character who cannot be properly placed into normative identity categories, and as a white drag queen impersonating somebody of a different race, Thunderfvck focused on the personality traits that made O’Hara such a character instead of just her race.

Fortunately for Thorgy Thor, Michael Jackson’s pale complexion during the last few decades of his life eliminated the need for a spot-on impersonation of him to include black face and Thor appeared to focus on Jackson’s odd media incidences, as well as the quirkiness of Jackson’s childlike innocence when RuPaul alluded to his alleged pedophilia during the “Snatch Game” in his performance.

Even though race performance in any context outside of RPDR is a highly contentious issue, it never really seemed to be troubled whenever it was enacted on the show. An issue that was contentious on the show, however, were enactments of boy drag because it went against the RuPaul-esc standard of queening. For example, the first semblance of boy drag in RPDR that was penalized occurred during the fourth season when the contestant Milan impersonated singer Janelle Monáe’s signature look of
wearing a tuxedo with a pompadour hairstyle on the runway, which was not technically “boy drag” since a woman was being impersonated, but was read as “boy” since Milan was a man in menswear. In the fifth season, Alaska Thunderfvck did a Pee-wee Herman-esque farmer character for a group acting challenge, which almost landed her on the bottom and was even criticized by other contestants who argued that it was not drag. Then for the first challenge of the sixth season, Milk’s runway look was more feminine than Alaska’s and Milan’s incidences, but Milk’s look included a white beard that received mixed responses from the judges. Milk continued to receive these responses from judges for looking quirky and androgynous on the runway, one in particular was an impersonation of RuPaul’s signature out-of-drag look that consisted of a bald head with glasses and a Klein Epstein Parker suit, until she was eliminated. The “Snatch Game” episodes that are in every \textit{RPDR} season usually give contestants the opportunity to impersonate flamboyant women in popular culture with big personalities, but until the last two seasons, as stated above, \textit{RuPaul’s Drag Race} has not accepted performances of male flamboyance or bearded drag. For example, season seven had a “Bearded and Beautiful” runway category where contestants were expected to present drag looks with beards. Since \textit{RPDR} is typically a drag competition for standard queening, it has been expected for every “Snatch Game” contestant to be an impersonated female celebrity; however, aside from the few exceptions of contestants impersonating other drag queens for the challenge, contestant Kennedy Davenport did boy drag by impersonating Little Richard in the seventh season’s “Snatch Game” episode and split her win with another contestant. Thus, Davenport’s victory seemed to serve as Thorgy Thor’s stamp of approval to do Michael Jackson boy drag for the “Snatch Game” because Thor did not even receive
responses of hesitation from other contestants the way that Davenport did in her season. Since Thorgy Thor’s performance was considered boy drag, it also seems to be a critique of the structures that have been imposed onto previous *RuPaul’s Drag Race* contestants, as well as a self-aware way of articulating that drag impersonations are more about imitating thing like mannerisms and character than they are about gender impersonation.

Part of drag impersonation involves rhetorically combining elements from heteronormative binaries and using their own embodied queerness to represent a differently nuanced imitation of a person’s character. In her analysis of a female impersonator, Selby Wynn Schwartz finds valuable elements that drag offers in Richard Move’s impersonation of a popular dancer, Martha Graham. Schwartz discusses the idea of “second body,” a concept in professional dance implying that dancer’s have “two bodies”: the first body is the one that s/he has as a young dancer who is a fully capable performer, but when that dancer’s body “dies” from injury or old age and can no longer perform, it enters the second body phase that is said to be more “character-building” (63-4). Schwartz indicates that since Graham is an older woman who is in her second body, the former dancer has a sharper character that Move is able to articulate with exquisite understanding through drag characterization (77). She says that Move proposes:

That the best physical expression of Martha’s essence is his own body, with its tallness, its broadness, its imperfect technique, and above all, its maleness. Everything that makes Martha a character is magnified though the difference of Move’s body from Graham’s, because the vividness and insistence of her character derived from the difference she could not help but see in herself as she aged. Move’s drag performance gives you the
tension of Martha as she saw herself: movement never lies, and then you are forced to witness what the body itself holds to be true. (Schwartz 77)

Move’s depiction of Graham seems to be something that can only be executed through drag impersonation because Move’s male body and characterization of Graham is apparently the best way for another person to combine her embodied charisma with her first body’s form and talent. This shows how Move’s performance does not ignore, or indicate an intention of ignoring, the natural masculinity that his body possesses even though he is impersonating a woman with feminine features. Similarly, even though Thorgy and Michael Jackson are both light-skinned, male-identifying, and flamboyant, which eliminates the visual incongruity that Schwartz addresses in Move’s performance, Thorgy’s impersonation of Jackson addresses an internal incongruity because the two were capable of resembling each other, but their racial differences were not equal. This emphasis on racial inequality shows how even though racism has obviously superficial elements, the cultural institution of it is more than skin-deep.

*M. Jackson: The King and Queen*

In Marjorie Garber’s discussion of racial transvestism, she declares that Michael Jackson’s drag is a form of tricksterism. She claims that Jackson “has deftly manipulated the stage vocabulary of gender” even though he does not cross-dress because “he is lithe, athletic, dazzling as a dancer, [and a] compelling singer [who] deploys the aesthetics of androgyny with skill and grace” (Garber 295-6). Garber addresses how Little Richard, one of Jackson’s counterparts and a male celebrity who was also impersonated on the “Snatch Game,” “had an enormous following among white audiences” not only because his music was accepted as rock and roll, instead of rhythm and blues, but also because his
style of dress stirred up such a spectacle that the press was too busy discussing his fashion choices, instead of his race (302). The historical context that Garber uses to explain this is the fact that Richard was popular during “a time in history in which segregation was still a fact of life in many southern towns” so his “transvestism was more than just an adventitious posture or a publicity stunt [because] his own vitality as a performer derived in part from the outrageousness of his outfits, the capes, the blouse shirts, the sequins, the mascara, and conked, oiled pompadour” (302-3). Thus, Garber argues that “transvestism can be a trickster strategy for outsmarting white oppression, a declaration of difference, a gay affirmative or a homophobic representation” because the form of “passing” that Jackson and his counterparts did “in African-American culture has, too often, been a matter of life and death” (303). This matter of life and death involves “economic, political, and cultural” status that these artists subversively achieve through elements of transvestism because it “marks the translation of a mode of oppression and stigmatization into a supple medium for social commentary and aesthetic power” (Garber 303). This aesthetic power that Jackson and Little Richard had seems to come from the idea that even though these men are racially Othered, they are not threatening because their flamboyance doesn’t aim to compete with white masculinity. However, a separation between Jackson and Richard that Garber doesn’t address, although it aligns with her theory, is how Jackson went a step further than Little Richard by literally making himself white. Jackson’s transition from black to white, as well as his feminizing plastic surgery, definitely added spectacle to his image, but going this step further must have been a bit too far since, unlike Little Richard’s strategy, it called attention to itself when it could have been intended to subtly detract from his racial
When normative identity categories are imposed onto Michael Jackson, the most accurate conception of his identity would be heterosexual, African American, and male; however, most people who are familiar with Jackson’s public persona, especially during the years leading up to his untimely death, can argue that these rigid impositions of his identity are negotiable. Michael Mario Albrecht argues that “Jackson cannot be easily pigeonholed into any single category across any of these binaries [such as Black/White, masculine/feminine, gay/straight, adult/child, organic/plastic, or even dead/alive], he discursively emerges as a complicated figure deserving of scrutiny and producing anxiety and fascination” (706), which appears to be the rhetorical motivation behind any comical impersonations of him. Albrecht further indicates that Jackson’s “failed performance” of race, gender, sexuality, age, and humanness is something that public discourses attempt to fit into rigid social structures while questioning them at the same time because “the agency to challenge existing structures of identity stems from the individual, rather than as a function of the inability of the categories to contain differences completely within their rigid structure” (711). Therefore, a result of Jackson’s presumed failure to fit into these rigid structures appears to serve as ammunition for comedians to mock the liminal status he occupied (Albrecht 717). What appears to make a drag impersonation of Jackson different, however, is the idea that drag and not other satirical impersonations that can be seen on *Saturday Night Live*, for example, is that the rhetorical purpose behind drag performances often seek to trouble normative constructs by parodying the actual categorizations that are placed onto people, and not the actual people themselves. Even though Jackson’s liminal status was not fully appreciated or understood, his gender
and racial fluidity qualified him to be impersonated by a drag queen, which was verified as drag by *RPDR* judges. Unlike other impersonations of Michael Jackson that mocked his femininity, such as Gillian Jacobs’ female-to-male drag impersonation of him on the NBC sitcom, *Community*, which poked fun at Jackson’s shift in appearance from being a little black boy in The Jackson Five to what appeared to reflect an adult, “white female” solo artist, Thor’s impersonation of him as a drag performer seems to critique the categories that public discourses tried imposing onto Jackson, as well as himself as a queer man and a drag queen.

Thorgy Thor’s parody of Michael Jackson could have been targeted toward the public conception of Jackson that Albrecht describes with added characteristics of Jackson’s appearance and quirks as comical additives for the “Snatch Game.” The public scrutiny that Jackson encountered seems to be from his arguably queer disidentification with traditional constructs of blackness and masculinity. Whether or not he was intentionally disidentifying, Michael Jackson did not appear to identify necessarily as queer or white, the queer aspects of his persona qualified him to be a celebrity who is worthy of being impersonated on a competition reality show for drag queens seems to overrule conceived borders between racial, gendered, and sexual binaries. In this sense, what appeared to prompt this spectacularization of Jackson was the public’s need to control him since he was refusing to align with strict identity categories, which is a phenomenon that contemporary drag seeks to play with.

*The “Bridge” Between Boy Drag and Race Performance*

The idea that Gloria Anzaldúa’s border theory can be applied to race performance
in drag is a concept that Shane T. Moreman and Dawn Marie McIntosh refer to as a *queer* mestiza consciousness. Moreman and McIntosh apply border theory to their observations in their ethnography about Latino/a drag queens in Central Valley California. Border theory was an appropriate theoretical lens for their study not only because these researchers were studying drag performers who resided in an area close to the U.S. and Mexican border, but also because they were making the argument that Latina drag provides a third space of sorts that allows these performers to challenge the performativest aspect of race by using their brownness to impersonate black, white, and Latina celebrities without appropriating either of these categories. For example, having a brown skin color or generally a non-white identity gives liminal power to Latina drag queens so they can exceed more than just gender boundaries; they also have the flexibility to maneuver between black and white without approaching the risky territory of performing black face or white face. Moreman and McIntosh contend that the liminal aspect of border theory resonates with Latina drag performances because they create a context that gives them “agency due to the power that resides within their interruptive racial enactments. Since race takes place in a continual construction, racial referents are inherently unstable and therefore offer the possibility of, specifically for the Latina drag queen, multiple re-articulations outside of the white-black dichotomy” (124), even though certain celebrities, as well as the drag queens who impersonate them, can live between multiple discursivities without necessarily being brown or Latina themselves. This particular phenomenon of Latina queens impersonating black celebrities has actually occurred several times in *RuPaul’s Drag Race’s* “Snatch Game” episodes. For example in season five the Latina queen, Roxxy Andrews, impersonated Tamar Braxton; in season
four, Kenya Michaels, a Puerto Rican queen, impersonated Beyoncé; in season two, another Puerto Rican queen, Jessica Wilde, impersonated RuPaul; and so on without any accusations that these queens’ impersonations of differently raced celebrities were inappropriate. The quality of each of these impersonations varies: Roxxy landed in the top three for that challenge, Jessica was safe, and Kenya landed on the bottom for her hyperactive Beyoncé portrayal; however, as mentioned above, there has been no hesitation or consequence when *RPDR* contestants perform as a person of a different race, showing that drag queens, Latina or otherwise, already seem to understand drag’s “interruptive power of racial enactments” that Moreman and McIntosh address although Latina queens appear to utilize this liminal status more often.

Since Moreman and McIntosh primarily focus on Latina drag queens utilizing their liminality to blur the lines of race performance, these researchers pigeonhole white drag as something that “is usually driven by camp and gender exaggeration, [while] Latina drag is characterized by approximating the musical artist being performed [because] the Latina drag performances that are given the most respect are those that closely approximate the overall idiosyncratic likeness of the artist” (118). While this might be true of the particular drag community that was studied, but elements of camp and the idiosyncrasy involved with celebrity impersonations are characteristic of most drag genres. Therefore, even though the idea of the mestiza is considered to be a combination of American, Mexican, and Native American, Moreman and McIntosh’s neat compartmentalization of the described raced drag genres seems to ignore the complexities that can be involved with expressions of something like biracial drag or impersonations of celebrities with more complicated racial identities like Michael
The embedded queer ideology of Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” appears to include all kinds of queer identifications, such as Thorgy Thor’s and Michael Jackson’s cross-racial performances, and can also be used to examine the element of boy-drag that Thor does as a male impersonating another male while the performance in question is still considered drag. Moreman and McIntosh argue that “just as border theory represents a space for multiple racial identities; it also serves as a space to negotiate between multiple gender identities and the corresponding negotiations of differing sexualities. [Drag performers] demonstrate a means of disidentifying by identifying and not identifying with normative identity structures” (120). These researchers give an example of this claim by describing Alicia’s, a drag queen’s, performance of mestiza-gendered liminality by explaining that she:

Elegantly eases her way into the wide-bounds of brown femininity but does not completely anchor on either side of the gender border. Instead, with legs spread, she sprawls across this gendered border to offer a borderland of gendered options. By choosing to display the outline of her penis along with her feminine attributes, Alicia disidentifies with the limitations of brown masculinity through identifying with the multiple offerings of brown femininity with her brown masculine body. (Moreman and McIntosh 127)

Even though Alicia is not performing what is considered boy-drag, her choice to reject a consistent feminine illusion by displaying what socially makes her ‘male,’ her penis, embarks on a similar territory because her’s, as well as Thorgy’s performances, both
deconstruct their organic male identities by ‘doing’ drag and reconstruct these identities by reinforcing their masculinity. Thus, the only difference between Alicia’s and Thorgy’s performances aside from one being a celebrity impression and the other a lipsync performance, is that Alicia establishes her maleness by directly revealing her male genitalia while everything else about her performance is feminine, and Thorgy plays a character who is effeminate like himself out of drag. Although, as Moreman and McIntosh point out about Alicia’s performance, both of these drag queens do what José Esteban Muñoz coined as “disidentification.”

Boy-drag appears to be a form of disidentification that Muñoz calls “interiorized passing,” a “tactical misrecognition of self” since it is usually performed in a hyper-masculine fashion by a presumably effeminate queer male (106). Therefore, Muñoz argues that the organic queer-self is toxic to the drag character, and the opposite is performed in a parodic, almost closet-like fashion to subvert the culturally masculine performance that men are expected to do (106). However, another subversive strategy for disidentifying with masculinity involves performing a masculine-femininity that contradicts heteronormative constructs of either category. In this sense, Michael Jackson’s persona appeared to be a form of interiorized passing because he never confirmed or denied a distinct gender or sexual identifications that were attributed to him, but did things in the public eye that appeared heterosexual, such as marrying women and fathering children, even though everything else about him seemingly contradicted these messages. In a similar way, Thorgy seemed to subversively “pass” as a drag queen by impersonating an effeminate celebrity who was a big character while still performing as somebody who seemed to identify as a heterosexual male. Thus, the combination of these
two embodiments in Thor’s impersonation calls out Jackson’s form of passing, similar to other satirical impersonations of him, as well as addresses the traditional constructs of drag that are imposed onto RuPaul’s Drag Race contestants and the cultural constructs that are imposed onto Jackson’s performance of black heterosexual masculinity.

Michael Jackson’s disidentification from performing “appropriate” masculinity that relates to queening brings a third space that effeminate men fall into in masculinist culture, as well as RPDR, to light. As indicated above, RPDR contestants can usually perform a different race without having to encounter any consequences, but when they trouble the standard of queening that has been established by the competition reality show with boy drag, several contestants have been criticized by judges and other contestants and even eliminated. This culture of reprimanding contestants for not following RuPaul’s standard of queening places a higher standard on drag’s recognition of female flamboyance than the recognition of male flamboyance, which is a standard that also seems to be in place in masculinist, heterosexual culture. A third space that queer men often find themselves in, according to Scott Lauria Morgensen, lies in between what he refers to as the heteropatriarchy that consists primarily of heterosexual, typically sexist men who marginalize queer men and women, and hegemonic feminists who are primarily women who tend to write all men off as participants of the heteropatriarchy. He contends that any implicit questioning of male participation in feminism “remains imbued by the hegemonic horizons of Western and White settler feminisms,” which would indicate that feminists are still holding on to hegemonic “beliefs that men exist outside or opposable to feminism and women’s studies until some fundamental difference among them is bridged” (Morgensen 542). Morgensen adds that these prior-waved
feminist efforts to separate the genders, which would eventually result in the separation of queer and transgender men from heterosexual cisgender men, “marks where whiteness and colonial modernity remain naturalized as discursive foundations of feminist thought” (542). Morgensen’s association between colonialism and feminism seems to apply not only to queer men, but displays of male effeminacy because queer men often marginalize each other based on male displays of femininity, which seemed to be the case in RuPaul’s Drag Race until boy drag was accepted in more recent seasons.

As Anzaldúa implies in her explanation of “mestiza consciousness,” her lesbianism links her to all women as either a sister or a lover; however, the examination of Thorgy Thor and Michael Jackson, should expand border theory’s horizons to investigate male effeminacy as well. Even though Moreman and McIntosh’s study is primarily focused on drag queens who transgress the borders between genders with their queer bodies that might be presumably feminine, the topic of male effeminacy is not directly addressed. Therefore, a drag interpretation of a controversially effeminate male in popular culture, such as Jackson, should jump start conversations about how drag not only affects perceptions of women not being exclusively feminine, but also how drag affects perceptions of men, including those men who perform in drag, not being exclusively masculine.

Queening Facial and Body Hair: Analyzing Bearded Drag’s “Freakish” Feminine Aesthetic

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is from celebrity makeup artist, photographer, reality show producer, and possibly most widely known bearded drag
queen, Mathu Andersen’s response to “why drag?” that appears in Magnus Hastings’ coffee table book, *WHY DRAG?*, which showcases an extensive collection of photographs and blurbs from various drag queens answering why they participate in this transgressive and transformative queer art form. Andersen’s drag aesthetic is what is known as genderfuck drag because beyond merely creating exaggerated feminine looks that allude to hyper-feminized depictions of fictional women in popular culture, as most genres of queening do to some extent, he seems to incorporate his beard into his feminine illusions in order to disrupt conventions within and outside of the drag community.

Even though non-genderfuck queening in male-to-female drag still might not be ‘conventional’ in the wider scope of gender and sexuality, its marginal normalization from *RuPaul’s Drag Race* seems to have established a standard of queening that acknowledges, but does not fully include bearded drag. Beyond merely claiming male femininity, as conventional drag does, bearded drag appears to claim a version of male femininity that also includes the masculine and rugged aesthetic of a beard and body hair, which articulates a kind of femininity that is overtly queer and free of this kind of heteronormative control. Similar to what Sarah Hankins identified in her observation of genderfuck performances, fetishized racial differences are often addressed and played with in genderfuck queens’ allusions to trans-species sex work. Since the bearded drag aesthetic alludes to hairy women who were featured in freak shows and circus acts, where these women were often sensationalized as sub-human, racial contrasts between white and nonwhite bearded women eventually emerged because bearded women of color were often fetishized, when bearded white women weren’t. This might be because white women with beards were probably still considered to be abnormal, but their lack of
exoticness must have made them seem less dangerous or mysterious, thus less alluring, since they were merely hairy versions of other women that white men had access to. Hairy women of color, on the other hand, often occupied a space that triggered men’s repressed fantasies about engaging in sex that might be animalistic or, at the very least, different from what they’ve been exposed to.

*A Hairy, Freakish, Feminine Aesthetic: A Brief History of Bearded Women*

Even though it might not be a direct allusion to famous hairy women such as Julia Pastrana or Krao, the feminine illusion in bearded queening seems to reflect monstrous female figures like these, which shows how bearded queens use society’s sensationalization of hairy women to deconstruct gender-normative inconsistencies regarding hair on women. Since the idea that a woman’s body and face needs to be completely hairless has become standardized, anything that strays from this norm is kept in its place with either humor or horror. In “Women with Beards in Early Modern Spain,” Sherry Velasco addresses how bearded women in literature were often sensationalized in comical ways for the purpose of policing and reinforcing “the superiority and dominance of the traditional male gender and sex conflation, as well as patriarchal heterosexual values” within the seventeenth century narratives that these women played a role in (181). She argues that representations of hirsutism in these stories often “involved a visual spectacle, which in turn required a narrative to interpret the transgression of cultural norms regarding gender and sex categories” (Velasco 181). Velasco further states that “while the hot-dry masculine traits are seen as virtuous when possessed by anatomical men,” when women possess these masculine qualities, “they become physical
and moral defects (terrible, ugly, lustful, etc.)” (184). As a result, when “facial hair
appears on an otherwise ‘normal’ woman” in literature, or even real life, “the result is
tragic, comic, shocking or a combination of these” (Velasco 185). Velasco contends that
during the early modern period, these narrative spectacles were ultimately used to control
nonconforming bodies through satire to make these women appear unthreatening and
through fear to ensure that audiences don’t become comfortable with the idea of bearded
women. The attribution to “the physical anomaly of male-biased causes such as the
danger of women’s imagination during sexual intercourse or to nature’s way of trying to
improve the inferior state of being female” was supported by misogynistic narratives that
“reveal the cultural anxieties inspired by the fluidity of sexual identities... that need to
exploit and control bodies that reject traditional notions of femininity” (188-9). Thus,
according to Velasco, bearded women have been depicted as spectacles in literature not
only for sheer amusement, but also as a way for heteronormative individuals to enforce
the idea that hairy women should not be normalized, which also appears to narrow the
scope of acceptable femininity.

When American freak shows emerged during the nineteenth century, bearded
women were put on display as human-animal or male-female hybrids that served as
scientific anomalies that need to be figured out. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that
the spectatorship of bearded ladies, among other stars in the freak show circuit, provided
opportunities for audiences to impose their interpretations onto them because “freaks are
created when certain bodies serve as raw material for the ideological and practical ends of
both the mediators and the audience,” which turns exhibited bodies into texts that are
“written in boldface to be deciphered according to the needs and desires of the onlookers”
Thomson gives the example of a popular bearded, indigenous woman, Julia Pastrana, who was also known as “The Ugliest Woman in the World,” “Ape Woman,” and “Hybrid Indian.” Pastrana was showcased by the famous nineteenth century showman, P. T. Barnum. She contends that Barnum and his counterparts “demanded that American audiences resolve this affront to the rigid categories of male and female that their culture imposed” onto its citizens whenever hairy women were featured in freak shows because subjects that were made out to be spectacles “provided dilemmas of classification and definition upon which the throng of spectators could hone the skills needed to tame world and self in the ambitious project of American self-making” (Thomson 58-9). Furthermore, beyond mere entertainment value from sensationalizing people who were considered “freaks of nature,” freak shows “thrived in an era of unbounded confidence in the human ability to perceive and act upon truth” as an opportunity for the masses “to formulate the self in terms of what it was not” (Thomson 59). In this sense, the scientific, or pseudo-scientific, justification that allowed consumers to speculate freaks’ categorical incongruities during the nineteenth century seemed to make commoners authorities of normalcy, which gave leverage to normative individuals, or the “normate” as Thomson calls them, to be critics and enforcers of what is or isn’t freakish. Oftentimes, these kinds of justifications gave unqualified, yet authoritative spectators of bearded women the leverage to label these women’s gender incongruities as social and cultural deviances. This flaunting of feminine illusions in bearded drag that don’t directly refer back to conventional femininity appears to celebrate a kind of femininity that has a hybrid element, which creates a post- or sub-human allusion and an aesthetic that is proud to be monstrous.
An example of a figure who was known to be a sexualized hybrid was Krao, a seven-year-old girl from Laos with hypertrichosis, who was introduced as a freak show performer in 1883, then remained in the freak show circuit throughout the late nineteenth century and early 20th century. Her body was covered in a layer of brown hair, then a full beard at a later age, and she was sexualized for both her condition and exotic race.

Similar to Barnum’s showcasing of Pastrana, Nadja Durbach claims that G. A. Farini adopted Krao and “exhibited her in the United Kingdom for seven months as ‘A Living Proof of Darwin’s Theory of the Descent of Man,’ the missing link between man and ape” because people thought that she resembled an ape-human hybrid, which was a narrative that made and sustained her popularity in the freak show circuit (89). However, beyond her constructed relationship to Darwin’s theory, Krao’s hairy body seemed to gain notoriety as a sexual object as well. Durbach states that Krao’s body suggested sexual precocity as a result of hairy women being “eroticized in part because female body hair typically emerges during puberty, thus serving as a sign of sexual maturity,” and since she was showcased in skimpy outfits so people can spectate how hairy she was, as well as parts of the female body that weren’t typically exposed during the eighteenth century, Krao “signaled both her sexual maturity and her own unnatural desire” (104).

Durbach also makes the case that Krao’s hairiness wasn’t the only thing that sexualized her because other bearded women who have been on display were easily “constructed as models of middle-class, and thus normative, sexuality because they were without exception white Europeans or Americans,” while Krao’s appeal as an Asian girl with hypertrichosis “stemmed from a different articulation of the sexual connotations of body hair that had a distinctly racial component [because] non-white hairy women tended to be
promoted as hybrids--part human, part animal--and thus were associated with a more base, primitive carnality” (107). Therefore, even as a small child and “the hairiest of these non-white hirsute acts,” Krao was read as an erotic object that apparently embodied fantasies that involved sexualizing “the primitive other” (Durbach 110). This access to unheard of and unspoken sexual acts and fantasies appear to relate to a drag queen’s occupied space of teasing repressed homosexual desires within male audience members, and when a bearded queen occupies such a space, she like Krao must trigger an even less gender-normative, sub- or post-human sexual desire. Therefore, part of drag’s inherent transgressiveness seems to come from subversively provoking sexual desire that deviates from any normative sexuality that is being represented by a performer, and bearded queens appear to allude to any repressed sexual abnormalities related to primal instincts.

By queening nineteenth century hairy women, drag rhetoric’s inherent confronting of heteronormative sexual repression by highlighting incongruous sexual and gendered beliefs that exist within the dominant culture can relate to the repressed desire to engage with bearded women in freak shows. The Stonewall Riot on June 28, 1969, served as a monumental moment in queer culture that jumpstarted an ideology that queer people can, or should, establish their own conventions that embrace queerness, oftentimes at the expense of heteronormativity. As a result, queer subversions such as camp media intended to undermine heteronormative conventions and embrace the queer as monstrous were created. In his discussion of how drag aesthetics fit into this political transgression, Daniel Harris maps out how drag began in the nostalgic glamour of old Hollywood, then evolved into something more rebellious and queer. Thus, Harris contends that “as a camp institution was elevated into a vehicle for gay rights, men began to subvert the studied
loveliness of the old-fashioned drag queen’s beguiling get-ups, her faded sables, yellowing ermines, foot-long cigarette holders, and trains of ruffled frou-frou, and cultivated instead a look of angry hideousness, at once abrasive and confrontational” because drag began establishing a specifically queer aesthetic, which involved new drag looks that had a major visual impact (68). This evolved drag aesthetic involved men wearing drag costumes with “proudly displayed hairy legs, hairy chests, hairy faces, often appearing with neither blouses nor boobs in the surrealistic, fuck-you drag of a figure that constituted a bizarre hybrid, half-transvestite, half-man” (Harris 68). “Self exoticization” took the desire of seducing straight men who gawked at them to a level of overt outrageousness, “a style that actively strives to talk back and antagonize, assaulting and intimidating as vigorously as older forms of drag once mystified and titillated” (Harris 68). Therefore, drag started borrowing the monstrous status that hairy women possessed during the nineteenth century, and using their queer bodies that misaligned with heteronormativity as texts of protest.

Furthermore, Harris remarks on how drag’s evolution not only showcased sexual and gender incongruities that bypassed glamorous nostalgia, but began emphasizing heteronormative incongruities of fashion and taste by incorporating “the tackiness of a world of asphyxiating conventionality” that exists within the closets of Middle America where “fashion atrocities for which drag provides an exhaustively comprehensive showcase [resides and an] archive of the egregious tastes of the homosexual’s bigoted opponents” (71) remain invisible until they are brought back to life as an ironic reminder of things that have been considered more socially acceptable than queer individuals. Harris explains this drag phenomenon as a way of “taunting, not women in particular, but
complacent heterosexuals in general” (72), which appears to serve as a way of troubling assumptions that come from people who are not socially conditioned to be critical of themselves in ways that queer and other marginalized individuals typically are. Therefore, drag’s evolution as a rhetorical form of subversive protest that led it towards an articulation of femininity that exceeds heteronormative femininity served a pivotal role in the creation of bearded drag, and eventually what bearded drag might be representing as a look back towards bearded women in freak shows, as well as a look forward for what might be an entirely new gender aesthetic.

Allusions to a Third Gender and Trans-species: A History of Bearded Drag

With this historical context of bearded women, the aesthetic allusion to freakish femininity in bearded drag can be discussed. Similar to how Pastrana and Krao were sensationalized and displayed as monstrous hybrids (man/woman, animal/human, ugly/desirable, etc.), drag queens seem to have reached a level of queer embodiment that equipped them with a retaliative confidence, which led them to embrace their queer monstrousness and a hybrid drag aesthetic that emphasized their femininity as queers, as well as their masculinity as men. From living in an incongruous culture that values masculinity to the point that it assumes virtue ONLY when conventional masculine traits, such as beards, are observed on anatomical men, as Velasco contends, queer men reside in a liminal space that allows them to subvert this masculine-feminine binary because while they are culturally feminized, some of them qualify as “anatomical men” who are capable of “acceptably” growing facial and body hair. Furthermore, when hairy queer men decide to become drag queens, there does not seem to be any hot-dry cultural
standards dictating what they should do about their hairiness. That is, while appearing as male, heteronormativity would encourage that they embrace their “God-given” masculinity, while conventional drag aesthetics, which serve as an opposition to these heteronormative standards, would expect them to completely feminize their bodies by shaving or waxing every body part that would be visible when appearing as drag queens. These cultural complications in bearded drag have provided a queering of conventional male-to-female drag, which creates an aesthetic third-space that articulates what might be a third gender or post-human/trans-species concept of gender.

In his ethnography of different queer cultures, Peter Hennen discusses a faerie drag community with bearded queens that he claims resemble a third gender. He writes that this style of queening “featured a unity of presentation that eschewed the stark juxtaposition of masculine and feminine elements,” which displayed a continuity in the clothing and adornments that blend what he calls “gendered shades of gray” as something that represented more than just playful gender performance because “it was linked to a lived history of interior struggle with gender identity” that was found to be much more “difficult to visually analyze in binary terms” (89). This more serious drag led Hennen to conclude that “this style was deployed with the intention of signaling something that at least looked like a third gender” (89). He describes one of these subjects, Calliope, as having “long, beautiful hair that cascades down his back; he uses it to great dramatic effect when he tosses his head back in conversation[:]; a neatly groomed van dyke beard and moustache[:]; wears simple madras skirts, and assorted pieces of junk jewelry that he somehow manages to wear quite tastefully” (Hennen 90). Hennen goes on to argue that Calliope’s more serious drag style seems to be more feminized within her community and
confers a higher status among surrounding queens, which is a distribution of status that he thinks undermines hegemonic logic that would give masculinized subjects higher status (91). Even though this defiance against hegemonic masculinity that Hennen observes in this drag community slightly reflects the rebellious nature in Harris’ discussion, the faerie drag community in Hennen’s study appears to value femininity and what seems to be an authentic genderqueer expression instead of a monstrous opposition against heteronormative masculinity. Therefore, the monstrous aesthetic that bearded drag started with out of queer radicalism seems to have begun evolving into something that isn’t as much of a political statement against gender hegemonies, but more of a “grey area” gender expression that exceeds cisnormative conventions. However, even though bearded and genderfuck drag might have evolved to such a level, it is still regarded as freakish in the grander scheme of gender expressions, and this freakish appeal opens up a space for what appears to be transspecies drag articulations.

Mathu Andersen and his drag aesthetic, exceed merely incorporating his beard into his feminine illusions because, unlike other bearded drag queens, Andersen also puts his beard into drag by styling and coloring it, oftentimes to match the wig he is wearing. His contribution to Hastings’ *WHY DRAG?* book is of particular interest not only because of his popularity and imaginative looks, but his response that is cited above because it appears to showcase a particular “fuck you” attitude that is relevant to genderfuck drag. Andersen’s response to Hastings’ question of “Why drag?” seems to call out what an outsider from the drag, or even genderfuck, community might expect a bearded drag queen to answer as “bullshit” because a perceived outsider might see Mathu’s gender incongruity and expect his immediate response to be something that explains or alleviates
this incongruity, but instead of appeasing such a hypothetical spectator, Andersen discloses that he does his kind of drag for himself. The cultural expectation for people to explain their physical appearance when it deviates from any norm implies that these people need to be apologetic of their appearance, which also indicates an underlying imposition of shame onto those who might be thought of as “freakish.” Consequently, a direct response to such hegemonic scripts is bearded and genderfuck drag, and more importantly, the defiant attitude that seems implicit in genderfuck rhetoric that not only refuses to comply with the conventional gender binaries, but refuses to comply with what has become recognized as a standard form of drag that has been established in RuPaul’s Drag Race.

Conclusion

Drag as a queer art form that has often been the go-to entertainment for heterosexual bachelorette parties before the legalization of gay marriage, has occupied a complicated space that involves performers being adored while still being spectacularized as distant cultural Others from these heterosexuals marveling at this outlandish setting that is designated for those with less privilege. Daniel Harris argues that this unfortunate dynamic between drag queens and heterosexual spectators is actually embedded into drag’s aesthetic because it succumbs to “the self-dramatizing impulse of turning themselves into theater for voyeuristic onlookers” (64). In comparison to the “male gaze” in feminist theory that is directed at women, Harris labels the heterosexual gaze directed at drag queens as a “gawk” (64). The gawk frames heterosexual spectators as slum tourists “whose uninformed preconception about homosexuality” is typically
sensationalized through the “strange act of self-exoticization” of drag, which functions as a stylized way for “marginalized members of an emerging subculture... to present themselves to the mainstream” (Harris 64). However, since drag often involves the performer’s decision to make a spectacle out of herself, the gawk becomes a “gaze” that is reclaimed by drag queens who reverse not only the gaze, but also the feeling of isolation as outcasts by making these heterosexual spectators “the subject of the same patronizing scrutiny they once directed at gay men” (Harris 72). In safe, queer spaces, drag queens are able to “turn the tables” and treat these ostensible insiders as monstrous freaks (Harris 72), and even sexualize the exotic straight men who are out of their element. Thus, Harris’ gawk places subversive power in the drag queens that are being spectated.

However, Harris’ reverse gawk only seems to address gendered and sexual differences, which seems to only empower queens when they are in their designated queer spaces. Furthermore, since bearded drag is still considered to be an anomaly because of its obvious defiance of gendered aesthetics, the genderfuck’s hairy, male body, like Krao’s and Pastrana’s, is made out to be a failed specimen of gender compartmentalization for presenting femininity with facial and body hair. Therefore, this perception that bearded queens are failures of an appropriate drag aesthetic complicates Harris’ idea of a gawk since bearded queens are often expected to justify their hairiness, as Andersen implies in his blurb, in addition to being gawked at as a freak by heterosexuals and other queers. Similarly, even though there are many other effeminate male pop artists that might be worthy of a drag impersonation on RuPaul’s Drag Race, the controversy that surrounded Michael Jackson’s personal life made him an
anomaly that separated him from his counterparts. Due to the “cultural anxieties” that he inflicted, the public was obsessed with Jackson’s physical body and everything that he has allegedly done to it or done with it. Death has become him in a sense not only because of the excessive plastic surgery that made Jackson appear almost post-human, post-gender, and/or post-race, but as Albrecht implies, “Jackson’s body continues to matter as discourse continues to reproduce Jackson’s body and its refusal to conform to dominant bodily expectations” (713), thus prolonging the gawks that are directed at him.

As a cultural fear of not being able to fully understand things that reside outside of definable norms, people who reside within the hegemony tend to gawk or stare at these outsiders with an entitled demand that these outsiders explain their incongruous status.

The idea that people whose physical appearance does not conventionally align with hegemonic beauty aesthetics not only have to be conscious of their apparent failure of physical perfection, but are also expected to provide some kind of explanation for their body’s failing appearance relates to what Rosemarie Garland Thomson refers to as the “stare” in the performance of (dis)ability. Thomson prefaces her concept of the stare by first defining disability performance art as “a genre of self-representation, a form of autobiography, that merges the visual with the narrative” that fuses “both seeing and telling” in order to foreground “the body as an object both to be viewed and to be explained,” which makes the displayed, disabled body the actual performance with an assumed narrative that explains how a person became disabled that entices spectators to ask the age-old question of “what happened to you?” (334). Of course, with a question like this one resting at the tip of a spectator’s tongue, there is an obvious presumption that the visibly disabled person was a victim of something that made her disabled, as well as a
privileged demand for some kind of explanation or justification for this non-normative presentation of a body. This uncomfortable dynamic between spectator and the socially constructed spectacle is what Thomson refers to as “staring,” which is defined as “the arrested attentiveness that registers difference on the part of the viewer” as a result of the social context of an ableist society because “the disabled body summons the stare, and the stare mandates the story” (335). Thomson further argues that “this stare-and-tell ritual constitutes disability identity in the social realm” because it “registers both the anonymity that confers agency on the starer and the singularity that stigmatizes the one who is stared at,” which makes this “ritual [a] social enactment of exclusion from an imagined community of the fully human” since the starer assumes that the “natural state of bodily inferiority and inadequacy” is not natural or even human (335). Therefore, with the dehumanized context of what bearded drag represents in the background, Thomson’s stare seems to apply to Andersen’s assumption that somebody will expect him to address their concerns about his defiant gender presentation. Furthermore, the ideology behind the stare also parallels the anti-miscegenation laws that banned white and non-white interracial marriage out of fear that these marriages would produce biracial children, since biracial people are “in between” races, thus they are more difficult to separate from what was considered human and sub-human. Even though genderfuck queens are objects of a gawk as queer monstrosities, they are also objects of the stare not only because their aesthetic represents figures that are seen as less human, but also because their “misplaced” gendered symbols don’t fit the standards that have been set by popularized conventions of drag.

As a result of conventional drag’s popularization, a hegemony within the drag and
queer community has emerged and marginalized drag that challenges gender and racial constructs. Similar to how freak show attendees were empowered by showmen to give unauthorized scientific opinions about the spectacles they marveled at, post-Drag Race spectators of feel entitled to give unqualified and uninformed critiques of all forms of drag, which often involves imposing a belief that drag HAS TO involve a conventionally feminine illusion, therefore, bearded and boy drag are deemed failures of this illusion. This influence from the competition reality show appears to be rooted in the fact that the panel of judges and guest judges on the show, with the exception of RuPaul, are not drag queens nor do any work outside of Drag Race that would qualify them to give expert evaluations for contestants. Therefore, if conventional drag queens are objects of the gawk who are capable of reversing the gawk, bearded drag queens represent objects of gawks and stares, which enables them to construct themselves as spectacles and subvert these colonizing impositions simply by making it clear that they aren’t losing their agency, as Andersen appears to do. This assertion of genderfuck agency seems to have subversive power because it doesn’t allow normative individuals to have a say in a bearded queen’s chosen aesthetic, which is a concept that relates to taking an oppressor’s authority to oppress other people away from them.
5. WHY DRAG MATTERS: LOOKING TOWARDS A PRAXIS AND APPLICATION FOR DRAG PEDAGOGY

Throughout drag rhetoric’s evolution since the beginning of the twentieth century, elements of physical and cultural embodiment, overt transgressions against normative assumptions concerning how people ought to perform their identities, and rhetorical subversions that involve breaking rules without having to face direct consequences have become inherent qualities of queening. Although queening has been normalized since the popularization of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, embodiment, transgression, and subversion continue contributing to drag rhetoric, and it still resides in the margins as a queer medium. Part of this marginalization, however, occurs within the drag community as different versions of drag began serving as foils to the seemingly standardized version of queening that is primarily showcased on *RPDR*. Not only do the show’s judges impose their standards of acceptable queening onto contestants, but contestants also impose these standards onto one another. These impositions often include a misrecognition for various forms of standard queening that are allowed onto the show, as well as forms of drag (queening or otherwise) that would never be accepted onto the show.

However, queening has evolved from being understood as mere “cross-gendered mimicry” to a recognition of its own conventions. Queening is now understood as any kind of enactment of gender or sexuality, with more contemporary forms of drag rhetoric playing with these and other intersectional lines more aggressively. For example, as a white drag queen who only addressed gender and sexuality in a binarized way during the
early twentieth century, Julian Eltinge was subtle about challenging the belief that masculinity was inextricably linked to homosexuality. Ironically, Eltinge’s subtle approach resulted in his heterosexual male audience members questioning their sexual attraction to Eltinge’s female illusion because they were being provoked by feminine artifice, instead of “an actual woman.” Drag rhetoric has now expanded into other intersectional avenues—both in its articulation and in the identities that queens have when they are out of drag. Nonetheless, standard queening still allides with normative gender standards to some extent, while genderfuck resists and blends those dichotomous standards.

It is precisely the critical and intersectional elements of drag rhetoric addressed in earlier chapters that could be applied to critical composition pedagogy because composition students are often expected to develop analytical skills to help them trouble discourses they are a part of and media they consume. In this chapter, I will connect my analyses of the drag rhetors I have addressed in chapters two and three with critical composition theory that involves troubling normative concepts of authority and success. Then I am going to discuss lessons and assignments that I’ve designed and implemented in a First Year English class as my attempt to apply drag rhetoric to composition pedagogy. To conclude, I will offer final thoughts about this project and make suggestions for future research and development of drag pedagogy.

**Troubling Normative Successes and Embracing Difference and Self Reflection**

As somebody who believes that critical thinking is the key component to effective writing because it involves reading and consuming texts with an analytical eye, then responding to texts with interpretations, showing that students understand the material
and can critique texts articulately, instead of passively accepting messages at face-value, I believe that self-awareness is a crucial part of thinking critically. As an instructor and academic, being able to “read” myself and the academic culture that I take part in is an important skill to model for students not only because they need to acquire a critical awareness for themselves and their work, but also because it seems too easy for instructors to underestimate the amount of power and authority they hold in the classroom, even when they seek to decenter or trouble that authority, as well as promote things like student diversity and diverse ways of learning when a lot of us tend to fall back on academic conventions. This is not to say that participants in the academy shouldn’t continue troubling their authority or attempting to reach diverse students by diverse means because this is important to consider, but I am proposing that drag rhetoric, as something conventionally unconventional, is capable of incorporating a level of self-awareness that recognizes personal and institutional limitations that keep instructor’s from reaching every student and using this awareness to subvert academic and cultural conventions.

How Critical Pedagogy Relates to Drag Rhetoric

A crucial aspect of critical pedagogy involves the promotion of student critical thinking so that they can recognize the world and culture of oppression for what it is, then seek to liberate themselves and others like them. As I’ve identified about Evita Bezuidenhout and Julian Eltinge, part of drag rhetoric’s message involved creating convincing illusions with a sense of self-awareness because it was implied that audiences had to be reminded that they were being lured into a seductive trap. In Eltinge’s case, he
had to constantly remind audiences that he was straight and masculine because his female illusion was thought to be so good, it was considered eerie in the sexually repressed environment that he lived in. Pieter-Dirk Uys on the other hand, made a convincing enough persona who was able to cleverly bypass any sensors that would have gotten in his way, and when things would get too serious, Evita just needed to revert back to being “just a drag queen” who shouldn’t be taken seriously. Although Evita and Eltinge had different intentions that depended on their situations, their implicit self awareness in drag rhetoric seems to detract from those with power who actually want to scam their audiences out of something because these reminders in drag performance seek to fool audiences, but keep them alert about other things that can exploit them through alluring fakery. For example, if Paulo Freire’s idea of critical pedagogy were applied to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” it would involve one of the slaves (whose entire concept of reality derived from moving shadows on a wall) being educated about the actual world that exists outside of the cave, which would shock him when the outer world is first unveiled to him, but once he has adjusted to the change, he won’t be able to return to his former life of oppression and might even attempt liberating other slaves. An application to drag rhetoric would involve a performer creating shadows that are so convincing that they would alter an audience’s perception of reality just for the performer to reveal that the audience has been fooled, which could lead audience members to think more carefully about potentially harmful, yet deceptive discourses that they engage in.

Even though Evita was a white man seeking to help with the liberation of black people in apartheid South Africa, she, like Divine, troubled her white and male privilege with drag, making Evita’s method of liberation detract from what Paulo Freire refers to as
“false generosity of paternalism.” Freire’s theory indicates that only the oppressed can liberate oppressed people because the cultural institutions that are in place make it infantilizing to the oppressed when people with more privilege attempt to liberate them and he defines the oppressor’s egoistic interests as an egoism that is “cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism,” which keeps oppressed individuals in a subservient and infantilizing position (Freire 54). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire theorizes a two-step process that confronts a culture of domination and detracts oppressed people from what he refers to as “egoistic interests of the oppressors” (54). The first stage Freire proposes for pedagogy of the oppressed is to “unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” because it is often the case that oppressed people don’t know that they are being oppressed or are unaware of the extent of their oppression (54). Following this transformation of reality, Freire’s second stage “ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” because oppressors should also be freed from the culture of domination (54). Therefore in a drag pedagogical sense, like Evita, I would be able to use the factors that marginalize me to my advantage to be able to reach out to students who belong to different marginalized groups; however, I would also have to keep in mind that I am also aiming to liberate students who belong to the oppressor’s groups who might view me as an imposture for what they conceive as an intellectual authority, which would limit who I can reach out to and liberate.

Aside from acknowledging my own limitations, part of liberating students and teaching them how to be autonomous citizens involves helping them understand dynamics of authority so they can be their own gatekeepers of useful information, as well
as be aware of where they stand in the social ranks of society. In his discussion about Richard D. Brown’s “hierarchical diffusion pattern” in seventeenth-century New England’s “scribal information economy,” Thomas P. Miller states that “information was transmitted through face-to-face conversations that reinforced the conversants’ respect for their respective ranks” (31). Miller further claims that these scribal transactions showed “signs of deference” and strengthened communal hierarchies because they reinforced “the authority of those who could presume to know better because they circulated more widely within the community and beyond it,” which means that cultural authority was granted to literate people since their teaching “was rhetorically influential in daily life and political relations” (31). While this historical account of academic and intellectual authority reflects the structures that continue to marginalize the culturally marginalized today, part of this dynamic is useful because it grants authority and the potential to influence students to marginalized instructors, as well as holds the possibility for marginalized instructors to trouble student’s preconceived assumptions about which information sources they can trust. For example, if a student with several prejudices would enter a classroom with an instructor who is part of a group that the student is prejudiced about, the student most likely developed his/her prejudices from questionable sources from outside of that class and would not trust the minority instructor. Thus, if this minority instructor would be able to maintain his/her authority with this student and effectively teach which information sources to trust and which to challenge for lack of credibility, there is a chance that the student might begin to challenge his/her prejudices and the source from which they came. This example of liberating the oppressors along with the oppressed is, of course, a highly theoretical situation that might not always work
out, but it at least demonstrates how establishing authority in the classroom can be used in liberatory ways. Providing a positive model of authority to students could also provide an example of how to be good citizens because after they have been liberated and demonstrate a heightened level of professionalism, it is likely that students would themselves become liberatory leaders when they’ve earned authority.

The creation of sexually appealing allusions to women who were considered “subaltern” during the nineteenth century freak show era in bearded queening seems to have liberated audiences to investigate their seducibility into contributing to the “sex economy” that is identified in Hankins’ study. These kinds of performances could be thought of as an attempt to lead audience members down the “wrong” path of tipping a zombie in exchange for an actual piece of her, or a slave in exchange for her sexual advances, so they can feel ashamed for enabling such an economy, and then interpret their discomfort that came from this experience. In a similar way, instructors who implement drag pedagogy could intentionally lead students down a path that allows them to make mistakes as a learning experience in order to influence better decision making for the next time someone tries to fool them. To do this, instructors would have to be subversive and convincing like Evita, then reveal harsh truths about their students by unveiling realities of oppression that are embedded into them like genderfuck queens.

_Drag Pedagogy’s Troubling of Authority_

During Divine’s and John Waters’ era, their reversals of filth and monstrosity as desirable seemed to trouble authority because it was their way of reclaiming queerness and other forms of cultural Otherness that were used against them. Similarly, bearded
queen’s claiming of a different kind of femininity emphasized normative aspects of compartmentalizing masculinity and femininity as entirely separate, which inflicted “cultural anxieties” because bearded queens and hairy women demonstrated a lack of heteronormative control and an embracing of monstrosity. Divine and bearded drag politicize individual bodies because while bearded drag queens are caught between symbolisms of masculinity and femininity for having facial and body hair that is only socially acceptable on male-performing bodies and not women or drag queens, Divine shows a lack of normative control over her body not only with her robust figure and tacky clothing, but with her infamous eating of dog feces. These examples show how bodies are inherently political and how part of drag’s transgression comes from troubling politics that most people actually have control over because it involves inflicting the “self-harm” of appearing as a buffoon, ingesting feces, and enduring the feminine pain of corsetry onto the self. The agency of self-inflicting troublings onto one’s own body agitates those who want supreme control over other people’s bodies because that is one of the few areas where others can have control. As part of shaping autonomous learners, composition instructors often attempt to decenter their authority to empower students in the classroom and influence more independent thought, which seems like an attempt to trouble conventional student-teacher dynamics. However, since students have been socialized to the institutionalized dynamics as people who don’t observe much authority in a class and will probably continue to experience this dynamic after composition, instructors should implement instruction that allows students to trouble some authorities, while remaining self-aware of the authority and privilege that instructors exhibit in the classroom.
Regardless of how much individual instructors strive to decenter their authority to empower students, institutional prejudices continue to prevent minority students and graduates from moving up in the academic hierarchy. In *Writing Matters*, Andrea A. Lunsford addresses how even though there has been an increase in diversity for graduate student enrollments, women and people of color continue to be excluded from positions of higher ranks in the profession (59). She explains that “part of this problem must surely relate to [the patronizing] departmental culture” that relies on self-promoting qualities—agonism, competition, individually derived and held authority, and a value of hierarchy—“as the currency with which we gain admittance to and advance our profession” (Lunsford 59). This highly competitive academic culture places minorities at a disadvantage because these students and professionals often have to try harder to achieve things that have been in place primarily for upper-class, heterosexual, abled, white, men.

Similar to Lunsford, I intend to encourage all of my students to strive for the best academic and professional opportunities, especially for students who have been discouraged by academic conventions; however, I am aware of the limitations that are in place for my minority students, as well as my own limitations as a sexual, racial, and disabled minority who is striving to succeed in this skewed and cut-throat environment. Even though I would be able to use my lack of privileges to set an example for marginalized students, similar to how Evita used her lack of status to subversively create status, I realize that my authority will already be troubled by less marginalized students because I don’t align with the conventional perception of what professors *should be*.

Beyond her self reflectiveness about the exclusionary environment that she works in, Lunsford is also self reflective of both how un-self reflective she used to be in her
previous attempts to decenter her own professorial authority and how complicated a matter accepting, as well as troubling, authority is for someone in her position. She states that any definitive “answers” to issues concerning authority are “more conflicted [for her] than ever before” because in spite of being a woman and person who wants to liberate students who often don’t have a voice, she is also in a highly privileged position as someone who is white, “a teacher, [and] a researcher positioned… in an elite institution of higher education” (38). This matter becomes even more complicated when instructors’ identities deviate even further from the conventional authority figure of being a professor than Lunsford’s. Lunsford claims that common perceptions of authority typically involve a sense of masculinity, which causes students to expect instructors to “live and act out their experience of authority” by using “power to manipulate and control them,” and when these expectations of authority are broken by different kinds of teachers, it is difficult for students “to cede authority to” these teachers (47). Therefore, if instructors appear to be “imposters” of what students expect their instructor to be--by not aligning with the conventionally upper-class, heterosexual, cisgendered, abled, white, and male status--troubling authority might already be out of the instructor’s control, which means that minority instructors would have to maintain their authority to prevent losing their students’ respect.

As stated in Chapter Three, drag has been a go-to entertainment for heterosexual bachelorette parties before the legalization of gay marriage, which involves drag performers being adored by these patrons from the outside, while still being spectacularized as distant cultural Others. This dynamic grants authority to those who have always had heterosexual privilege over those who, even if they can get married now,
would never have that privilege because queer people still need these spaces while these bachelorettes, like slum tourists as Daniel Harris puts it, are able to attend drag shows at gay bars, marvel at the spectacle as “voyeuristic onlookers,” make their contributions, and then leave without intentions of ever returning. With Harris’ comparison between bachelorettes attending drag shows and slum tourists, he claims that heterosexual spectators of these queer performances impose a “gawk” onto drag queens and queer patrons because their preconceived expectations of queer people are often sensationalized through the “strange act of self-exoticization” of drag (64). However, Harris also addresses that this authority that heterosexual patrons have over the queens they gawk at can be subverted and reclaimed by drag queens when they gaze at and objectify the heterosexual males at their shows because, like Evita and Divine, drag queens typically self-inflict their spectacular status to have subversive agency over how they’re viewed. This ownership of rhetorical authority can be translated to the classroom by instructors who are a part of marginalized groups and are trying to “play it neutral” when they teach multicultural content to avoid being accused of having some “agenda” by resistant students, which I will explicate later. This sense of agency could also translate to student writing by allowing them to “fail,” instead of always striving to be right, since there is no one way to analyze or write. By teaching students to “own their spectacle,” they could develop a sense of humor for their work and its failures, while also refining their rhetorical intentions for different contexts, granting them authority and control over their work.

_Failing Gender, Subverting “Success”_
As somebody who essentially was a straight-identifying, black male that was capable of being impersonated by a white drag queen, Michael Jackson appears to have “failed” at several different normative identity performances in a world that does not appreciate ambiguity. As rhetoricians who knowingly fail at gender and sexuality from expressing and enticing non-normative sexual attraction by performing as new versions of “woman,” drag queens like Thorgy Thor appear to master Judith Halberstam’s “art of failure.” As noted about Thor, bearded drag queens, and even Eltinge, part of drag’s transgression and subversion comes from them using their rhetoric of failure to emphasize cultural incongruities and failures in the world that oppresses them. In Thorgy’s impersonation of Jackson, she emphasizes how even though fans adored Jackson for his performance and early messages of social acceptance and equality, he was still made a spectacle of by a world that didn’t apply his messages to their lives. For Eltinge, he got to use his feminine beauty to highlight inconsistencies with sexism and homophobia since his performance was capable of seduction even when he made it clear that homosexual attraction wasn’t his intention. In a culture that makes spectacles of women with facial or body hair, bearded queens are able to make hairy women aesthetically pleasing, as well as problematize strict compartmentalizations between masculine and feminine by highlighting incongruous expectations of where hair is on male and female bodies.

Thus, these examples show how drag pedagogy can provide an acceptance of “cultural failures” as a way of troubling normative perspectives of success. In Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, they promote an acceptance of failure as a way of troubling the essentialist rhetoric of *positivity* and *winning* in popular culture and the
academy because the symbolic polarizations of *success* and *failure* carry connotations that achieving one of these things is completely desirable, while the other is completely undesirable, even though the situations in question are much more complex. For example, Halberstam claims that the American belief that “success depends upon one’s attitude” instead of “recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender” (3) makes it easy for those with more privilege based on where they come from and who they are to ignore the negative side of their professions. Therefore, Halberstam’s rhetoric of failure acknowledges these sad, but true inequalities that exist by contending that failure "allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” because it “preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers,” and “also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3). Thus, since drag uses its “incongruous” portrayal of gender and other identity categories in its articulation to trouble the patronizing, positivist rhetoric that is directed at them, part of drag rhetoric’s pedagogical value could involve incorporating what is thought of as failure to prepare students for the world that they would most likely enter after graduation, as well as give them more realistic expectations of what success and failure really are by deconstructing the success/failure binary.

Furthermore, drag pedagogy’s deeming of success and failure as mere social constructs, instead of actually winning or losing something in life, could also factor into the self-aware aspect of drag rhetoric that promotes audience critical thinking about being fooled by artifice. In terms of incorporating the idea of failure into pedagogy, Halberstam
advocates an “antidisciplinary approach” for more liberatory forms of knowledge production (14). Rather than depending on overtrained authorities “to lead obedient children out of the darkness and into the light... actually allow [students] to get lost in order for them to experience confusion and then find their own way out or back or around” (14). Therefore, Halberstam’s approach is crucial to drag pedagogy because it would demonstrate to students that their concepts of passing and failing aren’t what they thought it was; it often takes failing, then using independent and critical thinking to “find a way back,” instead of being told how to get back, to influence learning and self-reliance. Thus, while many instructors aim to use their privileged social status as people who are a part of an elevated culture by helping cultural minorities access this elevated status through the enlightenment of higher education, we should acknowledge the implicit “martyrdom” in this kind of mentality and show students that attempting to access this higher status is sometimes futile because of cultural institutions that aim to limit the social escalation of minorities. That said, this awareness of “cultural failure” should not disparage students from attempting to achieve social escalation or instructors from attempting to aid minority students toward these kinds of achievements, but these “reality checks” of institutionalized limitations should make the concept of failure more acceptable as a harsh, yet realistic expectation to have in a culture that does not truly value diversity.

**Praxis of Drag Pedagogy in First-Year Composition**

Even before the election of Donald Trump, which inspired a rise in overt fascism and resistance against any kind of cultural diversity, the implementation of a drag-based
critical composition pedagogy was thought to be a challenging task in a small-town Texas university. In fact, it was during the 2016 election season that I taught freshman composition for the first time and implemented early ideas of what I thought drag pedagogy would look like, and even though I did face some resistance from a particular student out of two twenty-person classes, the end result was not as bad as I imagined. Karen Kopelson addresses how critical composition pedagogies often fail to reach students who resist being taught about diverse issues, especially when instructors themselves belong to marginalized groups. Kopelson notes that incorporating diversity into composition instruction “delimits pedagogical effects and effectiveness, especially if we are marked or read as ‘different’ in such a way that students may ascribe political agendas to us the minute we walk into the classroom” (120). Indeed, the resistance I experienced from that one white, male, heterosexual, upper-class, politically conservative student mentioned above appears to have come from his rightist political affiliation, as well as the fact that he seemed most attacked whenever race, especially in relation to slavery, was addressed in my lessons presumably because I was completely forthcoming about being biracial Chicanx and white, while I am also male and made my sexual orientation ambiguous. I reached this conclusion because even though I addressed various topics in my class other than race--such as class, transnationalism, colonialism, as well as gender and sexuality, which I believe I was most critical of since gender and sexuality are my specialty--and this student was resistant about covering any of these topics, race appeared to bother him most when it was one of the few things I was open about since I am already marked as being not completely white. By Kopelson’s example, I believe that if I taught the exact lessons the same way as a white woman, my lectures concerning
gender and sexuality might have stood out as more aggressive to this student, and he probably wouldn’t have resisted my lectures about race as much as he did. In fact, a Latina colleague of mine faced both sexism and racism in her classroom just for having one or two lessons in the entire semester with Latina themes.

Thus, Kopelson advocates that composition instructors use “a performance of neutrality,” which she clarifies “is not akin to silence” or complacency, but “a deliberate, reflective, self-conscious masquerade that serves an overarching and more insurgent political agenda than does humanist individualism” (123). She claims that her “masquerade of neutrality actually may help open our students to more far-reaching explorations of difference” since students struggle to handle issues with diversity when their instructors appear to be too close to the subject matter being addressed (Kopelson 126). Therefore, Kopelson’s performance of neutrality provides a greater instructional distance from diverse subject matter and “may help to increase students’ critical involvement with difficult issues by decreasing their preoccupation with the teacher’s identity position” (126). Kopelson’s assessment seems to come from students’ fear that their teachers would factor their political biases into how students are evaluated because a lot of students don’t seem to understand that they are primarily being evaluated based on their critical thinking and articulation of arguments in freshman composition, which factors into their overall fear of failure that is addressed above since they believe that their instructor’s “wrong answers” might be synonymous with beliefs that they disagree with.

Kopelson’s connection between her performance of neutrality and metis in Greek mythology connects with my concept of drag pedagogy because like my connection
between Evita and *metis* in Chapter Two, both could exemplify a “pedagogy based in ‘cunning stratagem,’ invented to negotiate specific trials of student resistance” (132). She further states that “like or as a form of *metis*, the performance of neutrality takes the widest point of view possible [and] is unabashedly opportunistic” because it uses “students’ assumptions about education, and any prevailing classroom and political attitudes, as resources to achieve desired and opposing ends” (Kopelson 132). Therefore, like Evita’s ironic alignment with politically rightist views in order to bypass sensors that would normally prevent a drag queen from approaching politicians, Kopelson’s pedagogy involves a subtle trickery that disarms resistant students to allow learning to take place. Similar to how Harris addresses the drag subversion of being gawked at, drag queens, and in this case the instructor who performs as the *metis*, can self-inflict a seemingly spectacular status to have subversive agency over how they’re viewed. Drag pedagogy takes Kopelson’s suggestion further because drag is an obvious marking of queerness, which consequently removes the possibility of achieving complete neutrality, as does race, ethnicity, and gender; however, rhetorically problematizing race and racism, as Evita did, as well as other marginalizations while maintaining teacherly authority, can potentially result in a subversive and ironic neutrality that still remains ambiguous to students, so they wouldn’t quite understand what affiliations their composition instructors have.

*Using Neutrality to Apply Drag Rhetoric in My College Writing 1 Class*

Since I began my master’s program with some form of “drag pedagogy” in mind for my thesis, I often sought out ways of connecting drag with rhetoric throughout my
first year of grad school. Luckily, for my first semester as an instructional assistant for a
sophomore British Literature course, my lead professor gave my partner and I a chance to
take over one of his lectures in a four hundred person lecture hall. Since I had just written
a paper that connected Evita’s rhetorical subversion with Socrates’ ironic position as a
“foolish old man” in his dialogues, as well as his use of a woman, Diotima, in The
Symposium, I decided to cover Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” for my first lecture
and connected the irony he used for the oppression of Irish people with Evita’s irony for
apartheid, which was a similar issue that is more contemporary. However, since this was
done in a large lecture hall and the lead instructor already set the precedent that his class
was not discussion-based, I did not receive much feedback aside from a few people trying
to help me with my obvious nervousness. The following year when I was a teaching
assistant with my own freshman composition classes, I repeated this lesson, which my
students, even the resistant one I mentioned earlier, seemed to enjoy probably because it
involved a funny video clip of Evita and was highly interactive since I broke my classes
up into groups and had them identify and deconstruct apparent binaries in Swift’s text
and the synopsis I provided of Evita’s work. This particular lesson fit the structure of my
overall composition class not only because I used Evita’s drag rhetoric to make a point,
but also because it followed my initial deconstruction lesson plan that problematized the
gender binary.

Using Drag Performance’s Reliance on Visual Rhetoric and Music

The first assignment sequence of my class merely covered surface-level aspects of
drag rhetoric. Since drag is typically known for lipsync performances at gay bars, I
designed an assignment that involved analyzing the relationship between the sound of music, the meaning of lyrics, and the performance of a song as shown in music videos since drag performances often have to convey meanings that relate to songs in front of live audiences. For this Music Video Analysis assignment, I had students pay close attention to a music video of their choice and identify if the song and music video properly align with each other, and explain how the meaning of the song is either aided or lost by the visuals in the video. Aside from lipsyncing to individual songs, drag queens also design setlists that contain several clips of different songs, as well as sound effects, spoken word, etc. to follow some kind of audio theme, which shows how combining elements of several different things can produce an entirely different message. Therefore, after the Music Video Analysis, I had students either use the song they chose for this assignment and combine it with two other songs or choose three completely different songs to create a cohesive setlist that articulates some overall meaning, which was my Setlist Project.

When I originally designed this assignment sequence in a “Composition Pedagogy” class, I intended to have students plan an overall drag performance for this setlist that would have consisted of a fully imagined drag persona, an overall theme of the show that other queens had to follow, and their individual setlist that would have put their spin on the overall theme. However, I was advised against requiring students to conceptualize themselves as drag queens because most students would have probably found such an assignment to be superfluous, and several might have completely resisted. So by taking theirs and Kopelson’s advice of utilizing neutrality in my class, I removed the drag context of this assignment by just contextualizing it as setlist that a cover band
might put together when they are given certain guidelines for a show. Therefore, the drag in this assignment sequence was more implicit, while still being based on that original concept.

Even though most of my students took the bait of the example I provided, which consisted of three songs outlining the beginning, middle, and end of a love story, several developed extremely interesting concepts for setlists. One of the few students who decided to write about three versions of the same song made interesting connections about how Hank Williams’ “Your Cheatin’ Heart” was performed differently by Williams, Joni James, and Ray Charles due to differences in gender, race, and musical genre. Another memorable paper that came from this assignment was a narrative created by the songs “Cold Beer Conversation” and “I Hate Everything” from George Strait, and “People Are Crazy” from Billy Currington that was about an older man meeting a younger man at a bar, and the older man passing down retrospective advice about life and struggle to the younger man who is likely to go down a similar path. Even though the explicit drag element was taken out from this assignment, I believe that it taught students to really consider a song’s message to the extent that they had to condense each song to a simplified meaning in order to fit it into a larger anthology. By putting this anthology together, students also learned to consider rhetorical contexts of songs, intended audience, and overall purpose for articulating such messages.

Drag’s Deconstructive Troubling of Assumptions

Since drag rhetoric involves various deconstructions, I decided to center my First-Year English class around deconstruction as a way of troubling assumptions that are
typically taken for granted, as drag queens often do by utilizing artifice. The first unit of my class emphasized identifying master and counter narratives in the texts we covered so students could examine the privilege behind the construction of master narratives because the “morals” to these stories usually cater to stereotypic perceptions of Others and predictable resolutions at the end of the stories. I figured that master and counter narratives served as an effective way of “warming students up” for the more critical and theoretical Derridian deconstruction. Since Derrida is even too dense for most people in my graduate level “Rhetorical History and Theory” class, I used Nancy Wilson’s three steps of deconstruction that were designed for freshman composition in my class: “Step one - detect binary oppositions that privilege one group at the expense of the other; Step two - trouble the binary ‘to interrogate binaries that fuel bigotry’” (44); and “Step three - clarify why steps one and two matter” (39). As the binary that I am most interested in and, possibly, the most obvious that has to be deconstructed, I designed my deconstruction lesson plan around gender. The lesson sequence that I am going to provide follows each step of Dr. Wilson’s deconstruction process, then ends with a writing assignment that combines these elements of deconstruction with visual parody that served as my way of insidiously incorporating the “not-so-serious” nature of drag rhetoric with the critical aspects of queening that I’ve identified.

Since my class met three times a week, I dedicated each of Dr. Wilson’s steps to an entire class day. On the first day, I had students read John Berger’s “Ways of Seeing,” which is about the male gaze as observed in classic paintings of female nudes, and watch Feminist Frequency’s “Ms. Male Character,” which is a video about how most female characters in video games are an overly feminized version of their male counterpart(s). I
also assigned reader responses for these texts, where they had to answer “How do gender stereotypes influence the relationship between spectators (those who look at art) and spectacles (those who are looked at in art) in painting or other media? Do you find the role of the spectacle empowering? Why or why not?,” which elicited some interesting answers, aside from the one from my resistant student who claimed that there was nothing to read into with this topic; however, I believe that my students gained a better context of these questions after this class meeting. To kick off discussion and Dr. Wilson’s first step of deconstruction, I asked students to consider how media depictions of women as docile and submissive (in nude portraits, for example) privilege men/spectators (who are typically assumed to be male) at the expense of the woman in the painting, as well as women in general. Specifically, I projected the prompt:

Why does most media depict nude women instead of nude men?

According to Berger’s argument about women primarily being displayed as objects for men in art, do you think he would see ‘Maria La Loca’ as an object of the story or a subject? Why? What about the female videogame characters who were described in the “Ms. Male Character” video? Why?

How might these depictions of females benefit men? Do you think these portrayals of females benefit women in any way? Why or why not?

Then, as discussion progressed, I drew a T chart on the board with “Object” (where typically feminine/passive things would go) on one side and “Subject” (where typically masculine/active things would go) on the other side to illustrate the binary that is addressed in our readings by documenting where the key things we address fall in the binary. After discussion, I had students split up into groups of three or four, gave them a
couple of minutes to read the visual essay, “Reading the Gaze: Gender Roles in Advertising,” then assess who is the subject and who is the object in the examples that are provided, answer why this might be the case, and consider who/what benefits at the expense of whom on their own. After the class discussed their answers within their groups, we discussed their answers as a class and I added more things to our T chart.

For days and steps two and three, I followed the same general structure as the first lesson plan by having students grapple with questions before class, addressing them at the beginning of class, and then moving on to the next step in Dr. Wilson’s process to keep everything fresh in students’ minds as we moved forward. On day two, we addressed troubling the subject/object binary we created on the first day, which involved me asking if every spectator (a person who may have been previously defined as a subject) exploits their spectacle (a person who may have been defined as the subject’s object in an earlier class meeting). From here, we moved on to investigating if it is possible for the spectacle to exploit the spectator in any way. Then I addressed a complication that our second author mentions in his essay concerning fantasy when a model in a picture or a character in a story is spectated because fantasizing about someone does not equal “having” that person. Furthermore, as observed in drag performances, the use of spectacular status and seduction can also exploit spectators, which makes binaries not as black-and-white as they might seem.

On the last day of this lesson plan, we concluded our week-long discussion of deconstruction by moving on to the third and final step of Dr. Wilson’s deconstruction process that involves explaining why the first two steps matter. I explained to my students that using binaries is a useful way to categorize certain things in life; however,
they typically create oversimplifications for the things that are being categorized, as well as create problematic black-and-white ways of viewing the world, when real issues of oppression are much more complicated and incongruous than that. For example, Berger’s argument in the first article we read for this lesson plan implies that all women in art (and probably real life) are objects of (male) artists and spectators. Even though male privilege makes this argument true in most circumstances, our discussion from the previous day showed us that this is not always the case. For this class meeting, I had students read “Rewriting the Image,” which is a visual essay in their textbook that addresses the contrast between high art and low art, as well as how providing a parody of something that is highly regarded can “bring it down a peg” and give it a new meaning. The activity I designed for this reading involved breaking students into groups of three or four, assigning each group an original image (piece of artwork or ad) and a parody or “rewriting” of that image, and then having the groups interpret how the parody image deconstructs the original. To guide them, I asked them things like,

- What binary (object/subject, male/female, etc.) seems to be implied in the original image?
- How might the parody of the original image trouble the binary you found?
- Why might the implied binary from the original image present a harmful message?
- How does the parody’s troubling of this binary address the harmful message?
• Does the parody present a harmful message of its own? If so, what is harmful about it?

By having students attempt to apply deconstruction on their own in this activity, I prepared them for a writing assignment that involved having them choose a famous image and “rewrite” the image for the purpose of deconstructing the inherent binaries in the image.

In this “Deconstructive Parody Project,” students had to deconstruct a single image (ad, piece of art, video still, etc.) by creating some kind of parody of the image, either with photoshop or by hand. The writing portion was a 850-900 word essay that gave some context for the original image, identified at least one binary opposition that is apparent in the image, and explained how their parody troubles that binary and why their message in the new image matters. Aside from helping students learn about deconstruction and having them apply it by creatively deconstructing something themselves, this assignment helped students understand the power of parody that goes beyond mere entertainment. This connects with the entertaining, yet critical aspects of drag rhetoric because drag probably always would be a “low art” or “low culture,” as indicated in John Waters and Divine movies, which makes a drag parody of something downgraded to some extent, but with embedded cultural implications. This might have been because I centered this lesson plan around deconstructing the gender binary, but most of my students found different ways of deconstructing gender binaries for this assignment by putting masculine celebrities in drag; creating ads with scantily clad stay-at-home men with working wives; having shirtless male models link arms as they eat...
gigantic Carl’s Jr. burgers; and making half naked models appear “more real” with stretch marks, pregnant bellies, crow’s feet, and blemishes.

Final Thoughts and Future Research

It is almost serendipitous that I had the privilege of watching *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season six winner Bianca Del Rio star in *Hurricane Bianca* as I was concluding this project because Del Rio plays a meek, gay science teacher who finds a job in a small town in Texas and faces discrimination until he discovers his dramatic looking, sharp witted drag persona that reclaims everything he was denied as a gay man, plus more. During her season on *RPDR*, Bianca became notorious for her blunt personality and quick comebacks that intimidated her fellow contestants, and later kept her defiant students in line when her character was translated into a high school teacher in the movie. Del Río’s performance demonstrates how power is structured and institutionalized according to identities that people perform and embody, because certain bodies can get away with saying certain things. Since drag queens, like Bianca Del Rio, occupy a culturally ambiguous status that straddles privileged and unprivileged boundaries of identity enactment, the combination of their dazzling effeminacy and blunt masculinity allows them to taunt and ridicule without facing much consequence. Moreover, a lot of drag queens tend to embed fictitious character traits of crassness into their personas, which appear to function as campy remediations of women who are classed and racialized Others because camp typically involves exaggerating identity enactments to the absurd extreme.
Furthermore, Bianca’s performance as a drag queen teacher who can get away with calling her students names like “Bathmat” for smelling like feet, gave me a visual of how drag pedagogy could look in a more literal sense. Even though I don’t intend to ever teach in drag the way that Bianca did in a fictional movie, drag pedagogy involves incorporating elements of drag rhetoric in the performance of being an instructor. For example, in relation to Kopelson’s performance of neutrality, I have embodied some of Eltinge’s rhetoric of concealing aspects of my identity that are likely to make me an Other in my students’ eyes. That way, my students would be able to focus on what I’m actually trying to teach them without letting my identity as somebody who is culturally different from them get in the way. Since my pedagogy involves elements of deconstruction and celebrations of bringing things down a peg, I find Divine’s transgressive rhetoric influencing the content that I teach. As a more fully rounded drag character, Evita’s rhetoric influences my performance as an instructor, as well as the content I teach because like Eltinge, Evita is able to subvert censors that would normally aim to silence her regardless of how transgressive her deconstruction of power dynamics is. I believe that I channel Evita in the classroom whenever I address incredibly serious topics with a fictitious ignorance to make my students feel as if they have to “guide” me in the right direction and fully explain what makes each step the right one. By performing “teacher” this way, my students might find me kind of strange and not as authoritative as they’d expect college instructors to be, but this strategy should help them to carefully examine their beliefs and assumptions about the world, then articulate what is problematic about making these assumptions.
Closing

As indicated in my limitations, the scope of this project only went as far as theorizing drag pedagogy and providing lore from the First-Year English class that I taught for a semester. Therefore, this particular project can be expanded on with primary research that formally operationalizes things about drag pedagogy, then examines student assessments of critical subversion via surveys or questionnaires before and after key drag pedagogy lessons. Another primary research method can include rhetorical analyses of writing that students turn in from key lessons to gauge their critical understanding of the lessons and if there were any improvements in their writing. Yet, another limitation in this project was that I primarily focused on queening rhetoric, which served its purpose for the theorizing of drag pedagogy at this point; however, theorizing of drag pedagogy can be expanded into kinging (female-to-male drag) rhetoric, as well as male-to-male and female-to-female drag rhetoric, which could outline new ways of applying drag to pedagogy. Since drag is heavily influenced by the ways that identities are performed in camp media, future research could also lead to theorizing camp pedagogy. That way, there can be a form of pedagogy that is critical of oppression and identity enactment while avoiding the politically correct preachiness that probably lead us to the recent rise in fascism, which can expand the horizons of subversive, critical pedagogies because it won’t be limited to drag.

As indicated in my Preface, I tended to be subversively critical when I was younger without knowing what it was. Even though I didn’t intend to problematize the thin-normative fashion industry, an early indication that I was eventually going to be a drag queen was when I picked up sewing at the awkward age of twelve, and dreamt of
becoming a fashion designer for the odd and voluptuous kind of women I befriended during high school. Since I wasn’t very self-aware, I would sketch and hand-sew garments that resembled either what an emo drag queen or Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs would wear with the belief that my taste level was on par with the people who competed on Project Runway. Even though Karen O wasn’t voluptuous, her style and performance was as outlandish as I wanted to be if I were a woman, which was a breath of fresh air I assumed that the fashion industry would appreciate. However, when I made friends who were also interested in fashion design, I soon learned that there was something I wasn’t understanding about the hierarchies of taste and rigid normativity of this industry. Shortly after, I became discouraged from basically being told that my eccentric eye for style and fashion was wrong, which lead me to pursue other avenues for channeling my creativity and knack for creating. This detour lead me to explore various creative outlets, then I wound up pursuing an academic lifestyle as a drag queen who has learned from all kinds of trials and tribulations because I refused to let normalcy keep me down. Now, I hope to make my experiences with marginalization and normativity even more useful by letting drag pedagogy influence other people’s teaching and learning because I know that I haven’t experienced the best or the worst parts of oppression, but the power of drag could help those on either side of oppression.
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