DRAG KINGING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER IDENTITIES

EVE SHAPIRO
University of San Francisco

This case study of the feminist drag troupe the Disposable Boy Toys (DBT) examines the relationship between drag and gender identity. Drawing on multiple methods, the author explores the range of gender identities that emerged through participation in DBT. Members saw DBT as the central catalyst for their own identity shifts. The author suggests that these identity transformations occurred through four collective mechanisms: imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support. The author finds that DBT served as an identity incubator in which participants were able and encouraged to interrogate, play with, and sometimes adopt new gender identities. The author concludes that context is critical in understanding the meaning and importance of drag. Performing gender in this politicized, feminist context shaped the gender identities of the troupe's members in fundamental and varied ways, suggesting that oppositional communities can be an important venue for identity work.

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Drag queens can trace their history back to nineteenth-century female impersonators and the drag balls of the early twentieth century (Chauncey 1994; Schacht 1998). They have become deeply enmeshed in

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gay male bar culture and have reemerged as entertainment for both gay and straight audiences during the past 30 years (Newton 1972; Rupp and Taylor 2003). While early male impersonators such as Gladys Bentley and Storme DeLaverie set the stage for contemporary drag kings (traditionally understood to be female-bodied people performing masculinities), it is not until the 1990s that drag kinging developed as a widespread phenomenon in the United States (Halberstam 1998).[1] Some scholars argue that the camp aesthetic[2] at drag's core is unavailable to women (Davy 1994), so drag kinging is fundamentally different from queening. Others assert that the combination of lesbian invisibility within gay culture and the social naturalization of white masculinity inhibited the development of a mainstream drag king culture in the United States (Halberstam 1998; Murray 1994; Newton 1996).

Drag queens, and more recently drag kings, have been the subject of substantial theorizing by both sociologists and queer theorists (Halberstam 1998; Munoz 1999; Newton 1972). In the first drag ethnography, Newton (1972) argues that drag queens used gendered camp to resist homosexual stigma. In his research on female impersonators, Tewksbury (1994) finds that performances often draw on hegemonic gender norms and work to reinforce normative gender identities. In more recent work, Rupp and Taylor (2003) assert that drag queens pose a politicized challenge to beliefs about gender and sexuality in their performances. In studies of transsexual individuals (Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005), as well as in ethnographies of drag performances, drag show audiences, and drag communities (Newton 1972; Piontek 2002; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Schacht 1998), scholars have examined the meaning of public performances of gender and debated whether drag destabilizes or reinscribes gender and sexuality hierarchies (Dolan 1985; Lorber 1999). What none of this research has examined, however, is the effect of these gender performances on performers themselves.

Building on the above research, I assert that the gendered meaning of drag performances cannot be understood without viewing drag as a gendered process, in which the performance itself—as well as the organizational and ideological context in which it takes place—often transforms the gender identity and politics of the drag performer. I show that drag is not simply an expression of performers' preformed oppositional gender politics or preexisting counterhegemonic gender identities; rather, the process of participating in drag communities may also function as a form of consciousness raising and a site of identity transformation for performers.

As an intentional performance of gender, drag has been at the center of debates about the nature of sex and gender. Countering sociological

distinctions between biological sex and cultural gender (West and Zimmerman 1987), queer theorists such as Butler (1990) have used drag to argue that sex, like gender, is a social construction constituted performatively in interaction. Recently, Schrock, Reid, and Boyd (2005) argued that bridging sociological theories of gender and postmodernist concepts of performativity would allow scholars to examine how gender is the product of an embodied subjectivity. Similarly, Dozier (2005), extending West and Fenstermaker (1995), examines how the meaning of behavior changes depending on the sex attribution of transgendered individuals. Valocchi (2005) argues that incorporating a postmodern view of power and identity opens up new areas of sociological inquiry. For example, he asks whether the concept of performativity could be used to understand not only gender transgression but the development of everyday gender and sexual identities. Taking up Valocchi's call for further integration of performativity into research on gender and sexual identity, this article asks what happens to personal identities when individuals intentionally perform oppositional genders. Furthermore, as Valocchi proposes, research on the production of gender on and off stage has the potential "to extend Butler's analysis of the performativity beyond the public performances of the drag queens and into their everyday lives" (2005, 758-59).

THEORETICAL FRAMING: GENDER IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE

Gender theory has addressed the relationship between performance and identity by advancing the view that gender is actively performed through day-to-day interaction. Sociologists have theorized gender as an accomplishment (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987), a discourse (Smith 1988), or an embodied subjectivity (Schrock, Reid, and Boyd 2005). Queer theory has linked gender even more directly to performance by theorizing gender as continually (re)produced in interaction. As Butler elaborates, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1990, 25).

Building on theories of gender as performance, several scholars have also taken up the question of whether and how performing drag is connected to gender identity. Butler (1993) argues that drag is subversive because it reveals that all gender is constructed, and other queer theorists have insisted that through parody and critique, drag has political potential (Munoz 1999). The opposing view conceptualizes drag as reinscribing traditional

dichotomies and hierarchies of gender, sex, and sexuality (Dolan 1985). Ethnographies of drag communities argue both of these positions: that drag reproduces existing gender norms (Schacht 1998; Tewksbury 1994) and that drag has the potential to create new articulations of gender (Newton 1972; Rupp and Taylor 2003). While research on this topic has increased in recent years, only a few studies focus on drag kings (Halberstam 1998; Troka, LeBesco, and Noble 2002), which means that we have little understanding of whether and to what extent drag king performances challenge and rework gender and sexual binaries.

In this article, I examine one context in which drag king performances did constitute a destabilizing force in terms of gender. I also build on a large body of research in social movement studies that suggests that participation in oppositional communities can be a significant source of identity change (Klandermans and de Weerd 2000; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Stryker, Owens, and White 2000). As others have argued about drag queens (Newton 1972; Rupp and Taylor 2003), drag king communities are oppositional groups situated within a larger lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender social movement. I draw on a case study of the Disposable Boy Toys (DBT), a Santa Barbara–based drag troupe, to examine the relationship between drag—the explicit performance of gender for an audience—and gender identity, defined as an individual's gender self-definition (Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997). After a discussion of the multiple methods used in this study, I examine DBT's collective engagement with gender, identity, and politics. I then turn to a discussion of the range of gender identities that emerged through participation in DBT. I identify four collective mechanisms—imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support—that fostered diverse gender identity shifts for members. I assert that bringing empirical evidence to bear on the question of performativity as an embodied experience can, as Valocchi suggests, help sociologists understand the "adoption of our everyday gendered and sexual selves" (2005, 757).

METHOD

This article is based on a case study of the Santa Barbara–based drag troupe, DBT, undertaken between July 2002 and September 2004. I conducted semistructured interviews with 28 of 31 current and past members.[3] Participants ranged in age from 17 to 34, with 23 identifying as white, 1 as Black, 1 as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3 as multiracial. Participants described coming from or living in a range of class positions from poor to upper middle

class. Interviews lasted between one and a half and three and a half hours, with 23 conducted in person and 5 over the phone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Throughout the article, I refer to performers using their drag names and corresponding gender pronouns regardless of their gender identity out of drag. I chose to use the troupe's and the performers' real drag names instead of pseudonyms because DBT's distinctive style and national recognition made the group easily recognizable. In addition, each member chose to use his or her drag name in publications, and the group as a whole asked to be identified.

I also analyzed documents from DBT and from an annual conference called the International Drag King Extravaganza. In addition, I undertook content analysis of 200 hours of video-recorded drag performances from DBT between 2000 and 2004. Finally, I conducted participant observation from June 2002 to September 2004 at meetings, rehearsals, workshops, and performances. I used a modified grounded theory approach in which analytic dimensions were developed from close examination of transcripts and field notes (Lofland and Lofland 1984).

Throughout the research, I was an active member of DBT. As in autoethnography, I used my own location as a participant in DBT as a starting point for data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Ellis and Berger 2002), and I grounded my work in a history of feminist participatory research (Wolf 1996). I move beyond my own experience, however, and draw substantive and theoretical conclusions based on my observation and analysis. My position as a researcher gave me an opportunity to view DBT as both an insider and an outsider (Naples 2003). I joined DBT, as Noah Boyz, in October 2000 and performed with the troupe through its retirement in 2004. During this time, I participated fully, developed performance numbers, and took on leadership roles.

When I conceived this case study in 2002, I engaged in ongoing conversations with other DBT members about the research methods, data collection, and ethics. My insider status granted me significant access and rapport with the group. As an insider, I was privy to all group activities and was able to unobtrusively collect unique and nuanced data. I was also part of group disagreements and divisions. My existing relationships with other members, both friendly and contentious, affected the content and analysis of interviews. In light of this, I actively worked to recognize my own bias and effect on the group. I paid particular attention to what members assumed I knew, what they were willing and/or hesitant to share with me, and how I affected group decisions, processes, and outcomes. In every case, I have tried to corroborate my analyses with those made by other

members in interviews and recorded in field notes. Simultaneously, my sociological training enriched my experience and allowed me to draw theoretical conclusions based on the data I collected.

DBT

When DBT was founded, it was one of a handful of drag troupes, many of which existed in towns similar to Santa Barbara in size and university affiliation. Between its debut in May 2000 and its last performance in August 2004, DBT grew from a five-person drag king group to a self-titled "political feminist collective." While several other troupes, such as H.I.S. Kings from Columbus, Ohio, worked collectively or engaged in politicized performance, DBT's explicit feminist and political mission was distinctive.

The group was composed of drag kings, transgender kings and queens (transgender-identified performers, performing masculinity or femininity), and bio-queens (women performing femininity). The group lip-synched and danced to numbers that conveyed messages about sexism, racism, body size, and militarism. Performances also critiqued binary categories of masculinity/femininity and gay/straight through numbers about transsexual, genderqueer, and fluid identities. Performances took place in queer spaces (such as gay bars and gay/lesbian pride festivals) as well as at straight progressive events (such as living wage marches and community fundraising events). The group often performed benefit shows for political and community organizations. Paid performances at universities and bars cost anywhere from $200 to $1,800 per show.

DBT members were short and tall, fat and thin, masculine and feminine, newly out and firmly queer identified, although most were young, white, and middle class. Reasons for joining DBT were remarkably consistent. Most talked about joining because they were searching for a queer and/or transgender positive community in Santa Barbara, an opportunity to perform, or because their friends were involved in DBT. Seven members joined DBT calling themselves activists, but no one joined the group to do political work around gender. No members suggested they joined out of a desire for gender identity transformation. As the group grew, it became more diverse in terms of age, education, and class, but the group was consistently described by members and audiences as predominantly white, middle class, and affiliated with the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Toward the end of 2003, seven members moved away from Santa Barbara or left the group because of disagreements, and remaining members

held several months of intense group discussions about unequal leadership within the group and ongoing tensions about racial diversity and the politics of performance. During the next few months, members stopped volunteering for shows. As is the case in many organizations, DBT ended with a whimper. Without any formal disbanding, the group never performed together as DBT after August 2004.

As the DBT group developed, it created a structure that encouraged community formation. From the start, the group rehearsed all numbers collectively, relied on consensus decision-making processes, pooled group earnings, and spent time in group retreats and social events. The group developed a strong collective identity—or shared sense of "weness"—centered on several defining beliefs (Taylor and Whittier 1992). First, drawing on feminist organizational history and participants' experiences in progressive, feminist, and queer activism, DBT developed as a collective with shared finances, decision making, and leadership. Second, DBT incorporated the performance of femininity by female performers and came to define drag as any intentional performance of gender. Finally, the group responded to experiences of sexism and misogyny on stage and within drag communities by positioning its politics in opposition to these experiences and naming itself feminist. Each of these beliefs worked to construct boundaries between the group and other drag performers, develop a shared consciousness around drag and gender, and foster commitment to challenging hegemonic gender norms. DBT performances reflected this collective identity and helped members develop analyses of political events and gender codes and formulate collective strategies for change.

DBT shows typically included both verbal and performed challenges to gender. For example, one typical Saturday night show at the local queer bar began with a tall drag queen's stepping up to the stage. She began, "Hi! I'm Summer's Eve, and we are the Disposable Boy Toys." Summer's Eve appeared both female bodied and feminine. The crowd rushed the stage and began clapping. She continued, "We're a political feminist collective of drag kings and queens. Are you ready for a great show?" As the music swelled, eight performers dressed as cheerleaders stepped on stage and began lip-synching to female vocals from the popular 1980s song "Hey Mickey." Performers doing classic cheerleading moves included "women" with facial hair, "men" in outfits that revealed breasts, butch women, effeminate men, and a range of other genders. By the end of the song, the conventionally feminine-appearing performers revealed that they were wearing boy's underwear stuffed with socks to mimic male genitalia, and the masculine-appearing performers were flirting with each other. This typical DBT drag number,

with its performance of multiple counterhegemonic genders, suggests a complex relationship between lived and performed gender. The number made an explicit effort to portray a wide range of genders that were incongruent with both the performers' gender identities and their bodies.

What emerged in studying DBT is that participation in the troupe fostered gender shifts among most members. By "gender identity shifts," I mean both coming to a new gender identity and defining or understanding a preexisting gender identity in new ways. While 25 members identified exclusively as female when they joined DBT, only 16 did so during interviews. Instead, members came to call themselves genderqueer, female-to-male (FTM), and transgender. "Genderqueer" was used to claim a gender outside of the male/female, masculine/feminine binaries and was defined by participants as male, female, and in between. The term "FTM" was used by individuals who identified as moving from a feminine to a masculine gender identity or from a female to a male body. An FTM transsexual was changing the physical body as well as gender, while an FTM transgendered individual identified as masculine and with a male sex category but was not necessarily taking steps to alter his body. Finally, the term "transgender" was used broadly to refer to a wide range of gender nonconformity, including genderqueer and FTM identities.[4] While there is significant research in social psychology that examines how identity transformation takes place (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1988), what I take up in this article are the group processes that facilitated these transformations in DBT.

FINDINGS

Expanding the Borders of Gender Identity

When asked how DBT affected performers, many claimed that their gender identities changed because of participation. Regardless of the gender identity they held when they joined DBT, members spoke at great length about how being part of DBT facilitated the interrogation of their gender identity. As T. Drake, who was one of the founders of DBT and transgender identified, explained, "doing drag gave me a way to open the door on gender discussions with myself and with others. . . . DBT opened the door in a huge way because drag was the closest thing to what I was feeling and what I was wanting to live."

For some members, the environment of gender exploration led them not to transgender identities but to new femininities, and others came to identify as genderqueer and/or as gender outlaws, a move seen as both a political act and

as resistance to hegemonic gender norms. While some members became more visibly gender transgressive, others like Kentucky Fried Woman, who remained femme presenting, expanded the meaning of gender transgression—what she and others called a genderqueer identity—to include conscious and politicized gender play. She stated, "I do identify as genderqueer now. I believe that me and the people I perform with in Santa Barbara and here [in Seattle], my friends, my community, we're gender outlaws. We refuse to be placed in a box that says this is what we're born as, this is what we are. We play with it. And the more we play with it, the more I feel like the fucked up foundations that our whole society is built on are going to crumble."

When asked whether and how their gender shifted over time, DBT members described the development of a nuanced sense of identity. Participants who previously identified with the categories of male and female began naming themselves as located somewhere on a continuum of masculinities and femininities. For example, when describing how DBT affected him, Vance Jett commented, "When I joined DBT, I found more of my masculine side; [now] I identify more with masculinity than femininity." Members described how they differed from normative gender identities. Femininities included radical femininity, femme, genderqueer-femme, androgynous female, and de facto female. For some members who claimed a "radical femininity," doing gender was a political act of queering femininity and honoring the history of femmes in queer communities. On stage and off, these members worked to politicize femme identity. For example, in "Drive," two feminine women engaged in sexually explicit activities while lip-synching to a song about lesbian desire. Summer's Eve, a femme-identified woman, felt that this number challenged social norms by performing femme-on-femme desire and an empowered female sexuality. For others, queer femininity was a genderqueer identity, a reference to the transgressive performance of high femininity (defined by the group as extremely feminine dress and makeup). Kentucky Fried Woman, for example, argued in her interview that high femininity was equally as socially transgressive as female masculinity because of sexism, especially within queer communities. Members also discussed expanding "doing female" to include androgyny and argued that the category female is much larger than what is conventionally considered feminine. Dylan, who identified as a dyke and almost always performed masculinity, commented, "I have a really androgynous gender. For me, it's more powerful and expansive to say I'm female and look at all these things I can do. . . . Female doesn't mean you're bound to anything." For Dylan, and other members of DBT, drag was one way to unbraid gender and sex and broaden the meaning of "woman."

Masculine gender identities included butch, ambiguous masculinity, masculine female, and FTM transsexual. Many participants described a range of female masculinities (Halberstam 1998), including butch and masculine woman. Some participants drew connections to histories of butchness, and others saw maintaining a female body as a political act. Nate Prince, a butch-identified member who was sometimes assumed to be transgender, talked about a solo performance he created to female vocals. "I did the India Arie song ["Video"] to say I don't wear pantyhose, I don't shave my legs all of the time, and I don't look like a supermodel, but I'm still a woman. I wore my boxers and [men's undershirt] and showed 'here are ways to be a woman.'" Similarly, numbers such as "I Think We're Alone Now," which featured a romance between an FTM and a butch, linked female bodies with different masculine gender identities on stage and simultaneously reinforced these possibilities off stage. This number was an effort to distinguish between butch women and FTM men. During the creation of this number, Holden Thicke and Roman Hands expressed a desire to reflect their own sex and gender negotiations as transgendered and butch-identified individuals.

Many women performers went from naming themselves simply "female" to claiming a radical femininity, described as "chosen," "proud," and "transgressive." Similarly, a number of participants came to resist singular gender classification and prefaced naming with "if I have to choose," or "I guess I am." Regardless of identity, members described gender as a conscious act and explained these gender shifts as outcomes of participation in DBT. Summer's Eve noted, "We joke in DBT about drag being the gateway drug for gender regardless of what that gender is. Some members came into a masculine butch, some members came into a female-identified butch, and some members came into fiercely femme." Social psychological and medical literatures on how individuals come to define themselves as transgender (Bockting and Coleman 1992) focus primarily on the internalization of an incongruent gender identity in childhood. Participation in DBT, however, facilitated identity exploration during adulthood, as Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) argued that drag could do in their study of male-to-female transgenderists.

Collective Mechanisms and Gender Transformation

DBT created collective mechanisms that encouraged self-reflexivity about gender identity, which led to participants' gender identity shifts. I identified four mechanisms: imaginative possibility, information and resources, opportunities for enactment, and social support.

Imaginative Possibility

Members described DBT as a space where they began to imagine other ways of being gendered in their everyday lives. Some individuals entered DBT without any awareness of the possibility of gender fluidity. Damien Danger, who began DBT as a self-identified dyke and who came to identify as transgender within a year of joining, reflected, "A lot of people don't have access to questioning gender because it is such an ingrained institution and [they] don't even realize there is another option. I feel like those conversations within DBT [about gender and political issues] helped its members learn more about themselves and the world at large." As Damien Danger describes, participating in DBT opened up a previously unavailable space to question gender.

Exposure to academic theorizing helped troupe members, both inside and outside academic circles, understand gender as continually reinforced and contested. For those familiar with queer theory, performing drag was an enactment of performative theories. For individuals unfamiliar with academic theories of gender, discussions within DBT about performativity, coupled with drag performance, gave them a new language to talk about and make sense of gender identity as socially constructed and mutable. Echoing Butler (1993), Holden Thicke, a transgender-identified member with no prior exposure to performativity theories, explained, "DBT considers gender a performance even if it's not on a stage." The *Bio-Queen Manifesto*, written and presented at the third International Drag King Extravaganza by three DBT members and another bio-queen who performed with DBT, asserts, "We perform various kinds of femininities and female genders—from heterosexual housewives to working dominatrices—which are not equivalent to our 'real life' identities. Our gender performances may resemble or be connected in some way to our gender identities off stage, but they are valid performances nonetheless." This description is, at its core, a declaration of the social construction of femininity.

In support of these theoretical arguments, DBT members created many numbers that were explicitly about gender fluidity. In DBT's rendition of "Sweetest Perfection," a drag king and bio-queen move back and forth between masculinity and femininity in an intricate flirtation. At the end, the bio-queen pulls up her skirt to stroke a dildo, and the drag king wraps himself in a feminine scarf. This crowd favorite eroticized gender fluidity and nonnormative gender presentations.

While developing a general awareness around gender as socially constructed, DBT also compelled members to imagine themselves as differently gendered. For some members, this led them to question and eventually

claim a range of transgender identities. Through performing masculinity on stage, some members who joined DBT identifying as butch dykes re-envisioned their own identity and came out as transgender. For other members, DBT enabled a complex understanding of gender identity. Jake, who became increasingly butch identified during his years in DBT, was able to envision himself as simultaneously gendered in several different ways: "I identify as butch, but I also identify as genderqueer. DBT has also really blurred those lines in a lot of ways. It is something that I've known academically for a long time, but [performing in DBT] has really made clear. For me, gender is not just butch or femme, man or woman, trans or not, but it's so much more complex than that." The negotiations between performed and lived identities that drag can foster allowed performers to imagine embodying a range of gender identities that overlap and move in and out of salience. For Jake, identifying in contradictory ways—as genderqueer, female, and masculine—was a source of ongoing negotiation but was not experienced as problematic.

Gender in DBT was imagined as white, however, and this constrained the ways gender was imagined and performed. As Nate Prince, who is Asian/Pacific Islander and who was the only person of color in the group when he joined, reflected, "when I first joined DBT, I noticed that members of DBT didn't realize that the kind of masculinity they wanted to perform was a certain kind of masculinity, that it was racialized; it was a white, Western masculinity. I remember being told my very first practice, don't move your hips so much. I grew up around men who always knew how to move their hips." This focus on white masculinities limited the available gender repertoires. As Piontek (2002) argues, the assumed universality of whiteness led many DBT members to ignore how their performances were racialized. Four of the five nonwhite members felt that DBT did affect their gender identities, but in a mediated way. For some, this meant that DBT offered imaginative possibilities of gender in general but did not help them imagine racialized genders with which they could identify. This lack of resonance meant that they did not experience DBT as a free space for their own gender interrogation. Similar to Masequesmay's (2003) research on the negotiation of multiple marginalized identities within a support group, I found that DBT normalized dominant white masculinities and femininities.

With this limitation, DBT provided members with new identity repertoires and scripts to draw on in the (re)construction of personal gender identities. While these imaginaries are still informed by social norms, my interview and observational data clearly demonstrate that DBT expanded

the possible ways of being gendered that members could imagine for themselves and others. As one female-identified member commented during the second DBT retreat, "we are all genderqueer performers!"

Information and Resources

DBT offered information about gender identities and support services to members. DBT was a place to learn about transgender identity and community. Members shared information about genderqueer activist groups, gender theories, and which doctors in town treated FTM individuals. Tommy Gunn reflected that "the trans people that were in DBT were the only trans people that I knew at that time. They had their own experiences that they shared with me, and they helped me through a lot of stuff that they had experienced before."

DBT also served as a link to the larger transgender community and participated in local and regional queer and transgender community events. For example, DBT presented workshops and performed at the Los Angeles Trans-Unity conference from 2002 to 2004. Attending the conference helped DBT members tap into transgender services such as support groups and introduced members to other transgender individuals.

Just as being part of DBT helped both transgender and nontransgender members imagine gender differently, education about transgender identity happened for all members regardless of gender identity. Some members who joined DBT shortly after coming out as lesbian/queer or who had limited prior connections to queer communities expressed the profound effects of these educational resources. Trevor Bennett stated,

> Before I joined and learned about transgendered people—I'll say FTM because that is what my experience has been—I thought that women wanted to become men so they could be with a female partner and have society not reject them. As I gained knowledge about things like gender and met people that were transgendered, I realized that it's not about conforming to society's expectations. It doesn't have much to do with sexuality. It has to do with how you feel on the inside; it's a matter of feeling like you are in the wrong body. It was an eye-opening experience.

In many cases, DBT was a place where members confronted their own misconceptions and prejudices. As Nate Prince, a butch and lesbian-identified performer reflected, "it would have been really easy for me to be as closed

minded [about transgender people] as my friends were, but I'm not. DBT made me open my mind and made me see things that the transgender community was seeing and that I wasn't." DBT helped to educate participants about transgender issues, provided information about support services, and served as a link to the transgender community. By serving as a resource on transgender identity, DBT was critical in facilitating gender identity shifts among members.

Opportunities for Enactment

Perhaps the most important function DBT provided for members was being a place to try on, practice, and enact different genders. The opportunity for enactment was a significant collective mechanism for gender identity shifts. In DBT, members could try on a variety of genders, and many members who entered DBT with narrow ideas about what they could perform broadened their repertoire over time. Twenty-one participants performed both masculinity and femininity at least once. Indeed, some members performed both femininity and masculinity in the same show, quickly changing back and forth between numbers.

In a workshop on transgender and drag at the International Drag King Extravaganza, Damien Danger described how the chance to enact a diverse array of genders in DBT affected him profoundly: "When I first started doing drag it was a replication of what I thought masculinity was and that was a white, heterosexual masculinity. As I did drag more, these definitions all changed. Race, class, sexuality all intersect in your drag performance. As you learn about those things in drag, some people, including myself, have been able to take those and apply the same theories and questions to your own body." All members highlighted this type of gender play and the effect it had on how they thought about gender regardless of their gender identity. For some members, these opportunities for enactment amplified or shifted existing gender identities. Summer's Eve, a femme-identified participant, remarked that doing drag allowed her to explore a variety of femininities that, in turn, affected the lived femininity she expressed. She elaborated: "I no longer need to perform high femme [an identity associated with exaggerated femininity] in my daily life because I have a place to perform it. I get to be much more relaxed because my sense of self comes from my community as opposed to society at large."

The enactment of feminine genders was also seen as an opportunity to publicly challenge sexism and "emphasized femininity" (Connell 1987). In the DBT number "Natural Woman," nonnormative femininities were presented to highlight the constructed nature of femininity. Performances of

femininities included butch women, male-to-female transsexual women, and women with dildos, to name just a few. Members saw these performances of femininity as central to DBT's feminist project. As one member argued, "I made a point to perform girl drag [performances of femininity] because a lot of people wouldn't. Drag is the performance of *a* gender, and it bothered me when people said they wouldn't do girl drag because they identified a certain way, as if girl drag was bad." Resisting the privileging of masculinity in both queer and heterosexual communities, many members chose to perform femininity as a feminist act. They viewed performing girl drag as one way to claim space for and empower femininity.

The ability to discover gender extended to genderqueer genders as well. "When I'm Gone" was a number created by Jake Danger that explored this process. As the lights came up on the performance, parents carrying a picture asked the audience if anyone had seen their daughter. As the song progressed, the lead character—an older and more masculine "daughter"—resisted medical labels of FTM transsexual, lesbian labels from a girlfriend, and female labels from family while singing, "So hold me when I'm here / Right me when I'm wrong / Hold me when I'm scared / And love me when I'm gone." At the end of the song, the protagonist stripped off his shirt to reveal a genderqueer body with breasts and body hair, and then bound and donned a shirt that read "TranArchy" (transgender anarchy). This number was both an individual assertion of identity and a public demand for recognition of genderqueer people in queer communities and in society at large.

Performing reinforced butch and female masculinities (i.e., female-bodied and masculine identified) for some members. For others, DBT was a place to practice masculinity before embodying maleness in the real world. Tommy Gunn, who at 17 was DBT's youngest member when he joined and who began presenting as male full-time, explained, "DBT gave me confidence as far as being on stage and being more comfortable with the masculinity that I was starting to, on a daily basis, become able to perform. It has affected me in a big way." Practicing masculinity and femininity happened off stage as well. In rehearsals, more experienced members would teach newer performers how to do both masculine and feminine genders by demonstrating gendered ways of interacting. DBT also taught these lessons in workshops, offering a Drag Science Fair that focused on tips for doing masculine and feminine drag. As other research (Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997) has shown, DBT members used drag to practice masculinity before living as men, or to embody new or redefined femininities and genderqueer identities before expressing them in everyday life.

As with imaginative possibility, however, these opportunities for enactment were constrained. Because members did not want to perform racialized identities they did not inhabit and most members were white, the music and genders performed were racialized white. As Nate Prince commented, "DBT was made up of nonracist people who took to heart the idea that white people should not be performing hip-hop, and I understood. But at the same time, it inhibited me in what I wanted to do and what I could do." For Nate, one of the few nonwhite performers, the racial homogeneity of the group meant that he had to choose between doing hip-hop numbers by himself or performing in group numbers by white artists. Regardless of ongoing discussions, neither the homogeneity of the group nor racial tensions changed over time. Bill Dagger, an African American member, said that white privilege was manifested in DBT through participants' willingness to ignore tensions around race and dismiss critiques of DBT's racial politics. For example, participants heard that some community members felt that DBT's musical choices were white centric, that the group made too few efforts to diversify or reach out to communities of color, and that some of DBT's performances reflected a limited awareness of racial politics. While DBT was consistently criticized and avoided by some people because of these issues, many members dismissed these critiques as "personal disagreements" and "community tensions."

Social Support

The final mechanism that fostered identity shifts in DBT was the group's commitment to supporting participants' new and/or redefined personal identities. Many members found in drag a world previously denied them, a place where being female bodied, performing masculinity, and passing as male were valued. Femme genders were also respected as queer. Luke Hardwood highlighted the importance of support from the group in his transition, stating that "it really helped just knowing that there are so many people who are accepting and just don't care as long as you're happy."

Similarly, DBT's efforts to combat sexism and misogyny within queer communities as well as support femme members' gender presentations helped create a space for new and empowered femininities. As Venus Envy explained, because butch/femme dynamics were supported in DBT, she felt able to embrace her own femme identity. "I came to identify as femme, and I came to be very butch/femme oriented when I was never that way before. It definitely had to do with troupe dynamics." Venus suggested that DBT helped her cultivate an awareness of, pride in, and desire for butch/femme relationships and culture, what she called being "butch/femme oriented."

Such support was central in many members' narratives about identity exploration. Elaborating on the role DBT played in his coming out, Mike Hawk reflected on his search for a supportive community: "When I moved here, there was the gay and lesbian community of Santa Barbara, not really queer identified, because to me queer has a more political term to it. Trans was not okay, so I started getting involved in DBT. . . . There were other trans-identified people in the group, and although they were a lot younger, it gave me this chance to explore that boyhood, to explore male identity."

Many participants expressed gratitude for the visibility of DBT and thought that it made Santa Barbara a safer place for them to transgress gender norms. Bill Dagger, a genderqueer dyke, felt that "the presence of people who were openly discussing trans and queer issues in a performance way that was specifically about gender made it easier to walk around and not get harassed." Yet DBT was a safer space for white members than for people of color. As Bill Dagger went on to add, while DBT made the community as a whole safer, it was not a place he felt comfortable engaging with his own gender identity: "[DBT] seems to have been and continues to be a really powerful place for people to come out as trans. . . . Unfortunately, it has maintained itself as very white even though people of color have come in and out of the troupe. So, I'm not sure it's providing that kind of support for people of color to do that transitioning. . . . DBT was not the place that I felt safe enough to explore gender issues, where other people did feel as if it was a safe place to think through [gender]." Drawing a distinction between creating safer public spaces and fostering an environment conducive to personal identity shifts, Bill asserts that DBT did not provide the same kind of support for members of different racial backgrounds.

The combination of a close-knit supportive community in general and social support for members' gender choices in particular created a space that validated individuals' gender identities. Because DBT provided recognition for members' chosen gender identities, participants were able to navigate more hostile social environments, as femmes as well as transgender and genderqueer individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

Underlying and supporting each collective mechanism for identity change was the ideological and organizational context of DBT. Based on these findings, I assert that doing drag in a group with an oppositional collective identity, feminist political commitment, and collective organizational

practices can harness drag's disruptive power. Members saw DBT as the central catalyst for their own and others' identity shifts. Before participation in the group, 25 members admitted embracing hegemonic gender identities, with only 3 members identifying as transgender or genderqueer. After participating in DBT, members described gender as a range of masculinities and femininities and claimed complex sets of gender identities. All but 5 members described a significant identity shift around gender, whether that was within or across the gender binary. The members who did not describe a personal shift attributed this to previous gender shifts in their lives or a lack of identification with the group due to race.

At the same time, almost all members acknowledged the limitations of DBT. The collective mechanisms that encouraged identity shifts were not unlimited in their flexibility; they provided social support for some identities and not others, helped members imagine some but not all ways of being, created space to enact certain genders, and provided a limited set of resources. Most significantly, the consequence of racialized performances, white collective identity, and lack of racial diversity suggests that the mechanisms that fostered identity shifts were limited by race and ethnicity. In addition, it suggests that DBT was able to support identity and political shifts around gender but not around whiteness.

In this drag troupe, the mechanisms that supported identity shifts included the imaginative possibility of gender as fluid and mutable, information and resources that educated members about gender identities and services, opportunities for enactment of a variety of masculinities and femininities, and social support for members' chosen genders. These mechanisms affected all members of the drag troupe to varying degrees, regardless of whether they maintained their existing gender identities, took on additional more fluid identities, or came out as transgender.

Delineating these processes adds to existing research on drag in several ways. First, it demonstrates how drag can destabilize hegemonic gender, sex, and sexuality and reveals how, as Newton (1996) suggested, context is critical in understanding the meaning and importance of drag. In the feminist ideological and organizational context of DBT, drag actively worked to deconstruct gender on stage and among members of the group. Like Dozier (2005), who argued that doing gender was not an effect of sex but rather the negotiation between performing gendered behavior and "doing sex," I illustrate how DBT exposed the dynamic relationship between gender and sex through performances of incongruous and fluid identities and bodies. Furthermore, extending this argument, I suggest not only how individuals come to explore and interpret masculinity and femininity differently within

an environment conducive to gender and sex transformations but also how gender identity development is affected by racial demographics in an oppositional community (Masequesmay 2003).

DBT's knowledge of and engagement with queer theory and adoption of a feminist and political ideology around performance are shared with some portion of the drag king community, but these characteristics are not ubiquitous. My findings suggest that it is not some inherent element in drag but organizational context and ideology that contains the potential for challenging gender on the individual and societal level. Given this, my conclusions are generalizable not to all drag performance but rather to performance groups that share these group characteristics. Future research on other performance groups as venues for identity transformation would be fruitful. I would expect to see the same collective mechanisms I identified at work in troupes that shared similar political or organizational contexts. Building on my findings as well as on other studies of identity transformation (Turkle 1995), more research on how and under what circumstances these collective mechanisms manifest would help scholars interested in gender, identity transformation, and social movements better understand how oppositional communities function as venues for identity work. Finally, this study raises many questions about the nature of drag performance and identity. Further study of the similarities and differences between drag king and drag queen experiences and practices would help answer whether and to what extent drag king performances challenge and rework gender and sexual binaries in the same ways that some scholars have found to be the case with drag queen performances.

While performativity has been a heavily utilized concept in queer theory (Butler 1990, 1993), little work has examined how drag performances matter in the lives of individuals. The collective mechanisms described here demonstrate how the active performance of new identities has the potential to transform the identities of participants. Performing gender in this politicized, feminist context shaped the gender identities of participants in fundamental and varied ways, suggesting that oppositional communities are an important venue for identity work.

NOTES

1. As Halberstam (1997) notes, Black women dominated the world of male impersonation, and while there is a history of drag kinging in Black lesbian communities, the contemporary drag king scene has remained heavily segregated.

In the existing literature, it is the rise of drag kinging in white communities that is used to mark the emergence of the phenomenon in the United States.

2. "Camp" has been defined as an ironic portrayal or celebration, particularly with regard to marginalized groups, and is composed of incongruity, theatricality, and humor (Newton 1972).

3. As 1 of the 31 members of Disposable Boy Toys, I was also interviewed, by an outside interviewer, using the same interview schedule. While I drew on these data during coding, I am not quoted in this article. When chronicling identity shifts, I account for only the 28 individuals interviewed.

4. These indigenous identities are similar, but not identical, to distinctions made in other transgender communities. For more information, see Dozier (2005).

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Eve Shapiro is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of San Francisco. Her current research examines the use of creative tactics to engage with politics in the public sphere, transform existing identity repertoires, and build solidarity within and between social movement communities.