MASCULINITIES IN DRAG:
A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE MASCULINITY

Julie Louise Hanson

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ABSTRACT

_Masculinities in Drag_ offers a largely speculative but theoretically engaged analysis of female masculinity as it is enacted through the forum of drag kinging. Drag kinging is the predominantly lesbian and queer female sub-cultural practice of female-to-male cross dressing, with most drag king performances promoting ‘the woman behind the man’. This emphasis on ‘femaleness’, even as it is ostensibly disguised in male drag, remains crucial to the many dynamics that arise through performing as a drag king and within drag king culture. This thesis promotes that emphasis by exploring and arguing for drag kinging as a performance of female identifications, erotic or otherwise, with masculinity within an exclusively queer female economy of desire. I employ various and _varying_ theories on subjectivity, gender, desire, and fantasy to explore this, and further expand my analysis of female masculinity by focusing on the embodied and corporeal effects of performing as a drag king. This investigation reveals the refusal of drag kings to differentiate between traditional notions of mind/body, material/immaterial, and other adversarial boundaries in order to revel in new-found and provocative forms of embodiment and corporeality. Further, I develop the term ‘drag king embodiment’ to explain and expand on this, and to promote drag king embodiment as the corporeal ‘outcome’ of embodying desires for and fantasies of masculinity. This analysis extends to theoretically challenging accepted heteronormative models of gender, female desire, sexuality and subjectivity. However, such challenges reveal their dependency on these models, in so far as any perversion or subversion of them relies on acknowledging them as constraints – literally and figuratively. The ‘struggle’ against such models is not theorised as an inherently futile affair, but rather is viewed as a defining narrative that informs much of the erotic, sexual, and other dynamics of drag kinging and drag king culture. Exploration and analysis of female masculinity, in all its guises, calls into question the ‘natural’ socio-cultural position of women and their desires. By producing certain configurations of female identity, subjectivity, gender, sexuality and desire _outside_ notions of ‘proper’ feminine identifications is to produce those identities fully _inside_. Effectively, drag king performances work this ‘weakness’ in the laws that govern ‘femaleness’ in order to promote, eroticise, and celebrate female masculinity.
DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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Title: “Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of thesis would not have been possible without the generous input of many drag kings. The deeply personal and honest accounts of their female masculinities, desires, sexualities, and drag king personas, remain the biggest ‘muse’ behind this thesis’s analysis of female masculinity. Without their contribution there simply wouldn’t have been a thesis. I am also indebted to my supervisor, Dr Mandy Treagus, who has seen me through both my Honours thesis and the long drawn out affair that became this Doctoral thesis. Many thanks Mandy for your unfailing confidence in my research and writing, and your support over the years. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of my partner Sylvia, and my children Courtenay and Liam. They have also seen me through many years of study, research, and writing, and have never floundered in their support of my goal to write this Doctoral thesis.
1. INTRODUCTION: THE DRAG KING/DOM: SETTING THE PARAMETERS

Although there have been innumerable scholarly and mainstream articles, analyses, and studies on masculine femininity and the male-to-female performer, generally known as the drag queen, there has been little of the same on the drag queen’s counterpart, the drag king (see Plates 1-4). However, more recently there have been studies and public recognition of female masculinity and its performance through drag kinging, including *The Drag King Anthology* (Troka et al, 2002), but most notably, Judith Halberstam’s scholarly book *Female Masculinities* (1998) and her collaborative celebration of female masculinity with Del LaGrace Volcano in *The Drag King Book* (1999). Moreover, there now exist many websites devoted to drag king culture and female masculinity – too many to individually list here.¹ A quick internet search of the term ‘drag kings’ will proffer many sites dedicated to celebrating and promoting the performance of female masculinity. In addition, drag kings have even been celebrated in mainstream culture (some would argue a sad fate), with a whole episode of the popular television series *Sex and the City*, for instance, devoted to a drag king photo display, and the character, Charlotte, discovering her ‘inner man’ through the garb and accoutrements of masculine attire (Series 3 2000, episode 304). Not only is female masculinity promoted through group and individual websites, and more mainstream avenues such as magazines and television, but, more importantly, it is being celebrated and eroticised through the increasingly popular performance concept of drag king ‘acts’.

What defines a drag king performance or act? While there are myriad displays and characterisations of different masculinities presented through drag king performances, it is generally accepted that a drag king performance involves female-to-male cross-dressing and an accompanying act to entertain the audience with, or, as Judith Halberstam puts it, making ‘a show out of male impersonation’ (1999, 35). Most popular are lip-synching performances of male groups, singers and artists, sometimes translated through comedic affect or, more popularly, through an outright sexually rendered impersonation. Halberstam defines the drag king in opposition to the drag queen. Drag queens, she suggests, often rely on ‘theatricality and histrionics’ whilst the

¹ However, www.kingvictoria.com and www.chicagokings.com are two examples of well-produced drag king websites.
drag king relies more on a ‘paring down’ (1999, 35). The ‘art of the male impersonator’ she argues, ‘relies upon understatement and cool macho’ (35). However, such a definition may be limited in that many drag king acts rely on over-the-top displays of masculinity and, indeed, even revel in the dramatic when performing their drag king characters or personas. Having said that, Halberstam is more correct in stating that many drag king acts rely on ‘cool macho’. Coolness is almost synonymous with drag kinging and is hugely popular with many drag kings. In addition, as a quality one would like to possess coolness can be endlessly played out through different drag king personas and acts.

Whilst Halberstam acknowledges the fraught nature of defining the drag king – those women who dress in masculine attire, for instance, may not consider themselves drag kings – she does offer the simple definition that a drag king is a performer who makes masculinity into her act (36). Halberstam goes further to create a type of taxonomy of drag king performances, differentiating between ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ or ‘androgynous’ drag kings. The ‘butch’ drag king act, she writes, ‘is continuous with and elaborates an off-stage female masculinity’ (36). The ‘femme’ or ‘androgynous’ drag king only ‘assumes her masculinity as an act. S/he understands herself to be in engaged in some type of parody of men and s/he leaves her masculinity behind when she takes off the fake hair and the boxers and chest binding’ (36). However, differentiation between the female masculinities being performed or identified with through drag king acts should not be used to ‘measure’ whether one is more authentic or ‘real’ than the other. I am not suggesting that this is Halberstam’s intention, however, she does admit that she initially ‘went searching for butch kings who wear their masculine clothing as part of an identity’ when conducting her research on the drag king (41). What she discovered, however, was more complicated. While searching out ‘provocative butchness’ Halberstam was ‘constantly thwarted’ (41). As she discovered, the best drag king acts were not necessarily performed by the ‘butchest’ women, and the drag kings she encountered presented a ‘range of identifications offstage’ (41). After admitting the limitations of her initial privileging of butch kings, Halberstam gladly acknowledges the contradictory and confusing raisons d’être of drag kings and their acts, and concludes by suggesting that this remains ‘intentionally so’ (41).
NOTE: This plate is included on page 3 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Plate 1. Massimo and Englebert HumpMyDick

NOTE: This plate is included on page 3 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Plate 2. Drag Kings and friends

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Plate 3. Drag King friends

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Plate 4. Drag King friends
Unlike Halberstam, I have never been interested in classifying or ‘taxonomising’ drag king acts. Initially, any interest in female masculinity and its performance was sparked by the first drag king performance I witnessed in 1999 at a nightclub in Adelaide, Australia (see Plates 5-6). The drag kings varied in their interpretations and representations of masculinity, and although performing as a group, individually lip-synching to various genres of music, they came together as a whole for the finale, a rousing performance that whipped the predominantly lesbian crowd into a frenzy of screaming and shouting for more. What struck me first and foremost was the reaction from the predominantly lesbian crowd to a group of lesbians-dressed-as-men and the sexual and erotic nature of the performances. Clearly the reaction from the crowd was not just about the ‘authenticity’ or ‘realness’ of the masculinities being performed, but rather the fact that women – lesbians – were performing it. Interest in the clearly sexual nature of the performances was not confined to or ‘divided up’ between those female performers who presented themselves as butch, femme or androgynous, but was based on the knowledge of ‘femaleness’ that lay behind and juxtaposed with the performances of masculinity (I examine this further in this thesis). If there is any categorising of drag king acts within this thesis it is only that any acts or performances of female masculinity I discuss, speculate upon, or analyse are performed by females who openly acknowledge their femaleness or take it for granted that this is known by their audiences and admirers. To this end, rather than limit the drag king and drag king performances within the constraints of a predisposed notion of what constitutes ‘different’ female masculinities, this thesis accepts that no drag king act falls into any particular category, but that ‘femaleness’ is somehow central to many of the dynamics of drag kinging.

Just as drag queen performances and female impersonations rely on the knowledge that a man lies beneath the feminine garments and makeup, drag king performances also rely on the knowledge that it is a woman underneath the masculine garb and attendant facial hair. It would be difficult to deny that this dynamic is crucial to the pleasures, erotic and otherwise, that drag kinging affords both performer and spectator. However, it would be premature and careless not to investigate more thoroughly just why this dynamic is so important and how much this dynamic is important.

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2 This inspired my Honours thesis which examined the erotic potential of drag kinging for lesbians. Julie Hanson. ‘Sexy Lesbian Men: The Erotic Potential of Drag K Ring’.(Adelaide University, 2000).
Plate 4. Queer Boyz of Quebec

Plate 5. Queer Boyz of Quebec
when discussing the potency, power and eroticism of drag king performances of female masculinity. Whilst this thesis does not go into detailed analyses of the female masculinities being performed, or indeed, offer detailed descriptions of drag king performances, it does situate drag king performances within the tradition of drag as a theatrical genre and proceeds from there. Contextualised within this framework the traditional understanding of drag is that it usually relies on a revealing or at the very least the unspoken assumption of the ‘illusion’ being performed. Indeed, drag performances, to be effective and read as such, always rely on the ‘tension between the sex of the performer and the gender of the performance’ (Murray 1994, 346). In addition, and importantly, that tension is also read here as another relationship, a relationship not exclusively dependent on the ‘prior status’ of one (the ‘female’ body) or the other (the ‘masculine’ gender performance), but rather as one that is ‘mutually constitutive and involved’ (Russo 1994, 20). As will become apparent throughout this thesis, the female body comes to be re/defined, re/experienced, and re/contextualised in relation to the masculinity being performed and embodied, and correlatively, the masculinity enacted comes to be re/defined, re/experienced and re/contextualised in relation to the female body performing and embodying it. Further, the women that engage in drag kinging as a performance ‘outlet’ for their female masculinity may have every intention of destabilising gender categories through female-to-male drag, but they also, paraphrasing Esther Newton, often seek to destabilise the male monopoly over masculinity and drag performances and to symbolise and constitute the power and eroticism of female masculinities and female-to-male drag (1996, 165-166). In keeping with this position and focusing on the embodied effects of performing female masculinity, this thesis argues for drag king performances as always, and remaining first and foremost, female bodily enactments and performances.

Although this contextualisation may initially appear problematic, conjuring up as it does essentialist ideals, it is done so in this thesis in order to acknowledge the traditional proscriptions and cultural dictates that surround and order female bodies, and how these profoundly influence the experience and any affects and dynamics – pleasurable and otherwise – of drag kinging and its performances of female masculinity. Further, it acknowledges how those proscriptions and dictates help to augment and define, rather than diminish or suppress, the effects and dynamics of female masculinity as it is performed and embodied through drag kinging. At a more mundane level, that
contextualisation also openly acknowledges the incongruity that is regularly assumed when any relationship between female bodies and masculinity is apparent, let alone openly performed through drag. At the same time it also recognises that that incongruity is crucial to many of the dynamics that emerge from the performance and embodiment of female masculinity.

This particular understanding and situating of drag king performances of female masculinity, recognises and promotes the role of the female body then as central to the varied dynamics of drag kinging. Put simply, and in the words of Eduardo (see Plate 7), drag king and fan of drag kinging, ‘masculinity may be the subject of my desire, but it is informed by the knowledge that it is a woman up there, not a man’.³ Drag king Shon’s comments on the enthusiastic reactions she receives from female fans echo this view when she says:

Well, I like getting the reaction from women, the screaming and all that. … I didn’t expect them to be this into a male image. But then I don’t think it’s really about that, it’s about the person the image is connected to, really (quoted in Halberstam 1998, 261).

Although drag king performances do not usually include a ‘revealing’ in the true tradition of drag (although there are exceptions to this) they are certainly referred to and more often than not, openly presented as female-bodied performances of masculinity. For instance, Columbus’s famous drag king troupe H.I.S Kings promote themselves with the by-line, ‘H.I.S Kings - Where the best looking boys just happen to be girls!’ , and drag king DRED’s finale performance often involves ripping open her shirt or jacket to reveal bikini-topped breasts, or whipping off her moustache to reveal a ‘woman’s’ face. Just how and in what ways this ‘knowledge’ of the female body – the ‘woman’, and in most cases the lesbian⁴ woman – presenting and performing masculinity inspires, creates, and sustains the varied dynamics of drag kinging, remains a central theme of this thesis.

Although it might be problematic to employ the sexed body – the female body – as a ground, as something ostensibly ‘known’, it remains the stubborn, real and erotic reality

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³ Personal correspondence with Eduardo (22nd August, 2001)
⁴ I realise it is problematic to apply the term lesbian to all female same-sex sexualities, but I have done so here for the sake of clarity and brevity. I fully acknowledge that there are many identity labels employed by drag kings, for instance, queer, dyke, butch, and non-bio boi, to distinguish themselves and to announce their same-sex sexuality.
on which many of the dynamics of drag kinging are played out, particularly since those dynamics are often located in a lesbian or queer space—perhaps already a seductive space—or where those dynamics can be ‘lesbianised’ by same-sex desires and fantasies. Foregrounding the female body as a ‘known’ body or ‘real’ body, is not to assume the ‘sexed specificity’ of that body as the ‘irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear’ (Butler 1993, 28). Rather it is to argue for both the materiality and constructedness of that body simultaneously. The female body then, is a kind of ‘point of departure’ here, but a point of departure that acknowledges the female body as both a sexed body that is a construction and one that bears cultural constructions (28). Further, my foregrounding of the female body is inspired by the drag kings themselves. Their personal narratives—referred to throughout the course of this thesis—attest to the fact that the female body is both the reference point and the carnal dimension through and on which many of the dynamics of drag kinging are experienced, translated and interpreted. In essence, and paraphrasing Diana Fuss, by acknowledging those narratives I am recognising both the ‘authority of experience’ and its empowering effects, while at the same time acknowledging the central role prevailing social, cultural and historical constructions of femaleness and femininity play in shaping and producing those lived experiences and effects (Fuss 1989, 118).

1.1 A Word on Methodology

At this point it is important to explain and discuss the methodologies employed to gather the first-hand narratives of drag kings. From the outset it was crucial to collect personal accounts of female masculinity in order that theoretical models could be developed and applied to analyses and speculative discussions on female masculinity and its performance and embodiment. To this end I joined a drag king mailing list (US

5 The emphasis here on female same-sex desires and fantasies is not meant to exclude the possibility that men might also engage in their own identifications and desires with/for drag kinging. However, because the theme of this thesis focuses on the dynamics of drag kinging within a ‘female economy’ of desire and identification, the emphasis remains confined to this, although it certainly doesn’t deny the erotic or sexual charge some drag kings get from being desired by gay male spectators. With that said, I still maintain that such eroticism remains within a female economy of desire, because in this instance I would be explicitly interested in examining the eroticism and desire felt/experienced/elaborated upon by the women performing as drag kings to this ‘gay gaze’, and not the erotic experiences of gay men within the culture of drag kinging.
based but internationally inclusive) and invited interested parties to become involved in my research. Those who participated voluntarily completed a questionnaire I devised (see appendix), with the choice of remaining anonymous (which some respondents chose). Some respondents chose to have on-going contact with me throughout the period of my research, mostly though email correspondence. Where clarification of answers or further expansion on personal experiences of female masculinity were sought by me, all respondents contacted were happy to reply and generous in their responses. In some cases my research and queries opened up a space for individuals to examine their own female masculinity and its performance through drag kinging – an experience some had not done prior to my friendly ‘interrogations’. This also elicited emails and further correspondence between me and various drag kings. Where permission was granted to include or otherwise use such correspondence, I have included reference to it in the bibliography. Where permission was not granted or for other reasons not gained, I have not made any direct reference to it in the thesis or bibliography. However, I have employed any insights gained from that correspondence to inspire or otherwise enhance any theoretical speculations I make throughout this thesis, without direct reference made to one person.

Although the number of respondents remained fairly low at 32 their input remains inspirational and invaluable. Not only did they motivate my focus on the significance of the female body to the varied dynamics of drag kinging, but also on many of the theoretical and speculative approaches I take throughout the course of this thesis. In many ways, there would be no thesis without the valuable contribution of the drag kings’ personal narratives. Further, easy access to drag king websites also made it easy to keep up-to-date with the drag king scene and follow the performances of several drag kings involved in my research. In addition, with the advent of ‘YouTube’ video clips, access is readily available to many drag king performances. Although some respondents come from countries other than the United States (Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and Australia), most are from North America, and a few respondents identified as African-American and Asian-American. How this may affect or have a direct influence on how those drag kings responded to the questionnaire is debatable. As the questionnaire was predominantly interested in individual actions, reactions and responses – mainly bodily – geographical, social or cultural location and ethnicity may

6 See [http://www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). A search under drag kings will provide many drag king video clip performances.
or may not directly correlate with these. Although it might seem remiss not to include
issues of race or ethnicity throughout the course of this thesis and in any discussions
about female masculinity, it is only because issues of race were not directly raised by
the questionnaire or by the respondents in the questionnaire, or openly referred to in any
correspondence with me. If there was any allusion to race it was only with reference to
one’s drag king persona – although one’s ethnic identity certainly did not restrict one’s
choice of persona. This meant African or Asian American’s did not restrict themselves
to only performing their masculine ethnic ‘equivalents’: in fact, there has been an
African American Billy Idol (of ‘Nice day for a white wedding’ fame) and an
Australian Aboriginal Elvis. In addition, ethnic identity did not restrict Anglo-Saxon
drag kings from performing African-American stars, groups or singers either, with
Prince, amongst other African-American artists, being a favourite drag king persona to
adopt and perform. Although race may be an issue in drag king culture, how it might be
is not something I have investigated throughout my research. More emphasis has been
placed on female subjectivity, embodiment and sexuality, meaning one’s *individual*
sense of these as explained and authorised by the personal narratives of the drag kings
themselves, and as previously mentioned, with the knowledge that each narrative is in
some way shaped and produced by social, cultural and historical constructions of
‘femaleness’.

Because my initial focus was primarily on the embodied effects of drag kinging for
those women who practiced it, the questionnaire was geared towards eliciting
information on this. Rather than elicit responses on whether geographical, social and
cultural location or ethnicity were relevant to one’s female masculinity, I left it to the
respondents to decide whether this was directly related to their drag king selves. As
previously mentioned, in some cases it was, but usually as a response to voluntary
demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire, which some respondents chose
not to respond to at all. There was no direct link made between geographical, social or
cultural location, or race and ethnicity, and each respondent’s personal experiences of
female masculinity through the forum of drag king performances.
1.2 The Drag King Scene/Seen

Whilst drag king culture is only a recent phenomenon, it has promoted, and continues to promote, recognition of the potentialities and possibilities of drag king performances, and the appeal and magnetism of female masculinity. The growth in drag king culture has been phenomenal over the past few years, as attested to by the flood of drag king websites and video clips of performances available on the internet. Further, since 1999 there is now an annual ‘International Drag King Extravaganza’, which usually involves a conference, drag king workshops, drag king discussion groups, and, of course, many drag king performances. Whilst ostensibly a lesbian sub-cultural practice, and indeed, still relatively unknown outside of those circles that perform or appreciate drag king performances, the drag king scene has become more and more active, sophisticated and collective. For example, drag kings now come from many countries as far away as Japan and Australia to participate at the annual International Drag King Extravaganza in the United States and Canada, testament to the appeal of an organised and collaborative drag king event. In addition to this, the drag king scene continues to promote its inclusive and generally non-competitive nature. Any woman can have a go at ‘dragging’ out her female masculinity.

The arena of drag king culture remains an environment where fantasies of, desires for, and identifications with various masculinities can be played out, celebrated, and eroticised on and through the female body. It promotes a safe space where women can explore, perform, and embody those fantasies, desires, and identifications, and where personal and other inhibitions may be discarded, permitting not only one’s masculinity to ‘come out’, but also engagement with other erotic and identificatory positions. Although this suggests that drag king culture remains a specific, and therefore, exclusive sociosexual and sociocultural context for the performance and eroticisation of female masculinity, it would deny this effusively. Further, any accusation of exclusivity would be misguided. In addition to allowing for the celebration and eroticisation of female masculinities, the context of drag king culture provides a ‘broader social sphere

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7 See the official website of The International Drag King Extravaganza at http://www.idke.info/home.html for updates on the latest events and information on this year’s extravaganza in Columbus, Ohio.

8 For instance, I am forever having to explain and clarify what a drag king or drag kinging ‘is’ when asked about my research.
of enactment’, where self-identifications previously constituted and contained within fantasy and desire are literalised on and through the female body, and further, are understood, legitimated, and confirmed through and within this context (Hale 1997, 229).

Within drag king culture, female masculinity, as it is performed and made legible on the female drag king body, is re-signified as desirable and powerful, rather than signalling an abject or failed figure of womanhood – as is traditionally the case. In addition, female masculinity perversely and ‘queerly’ contests symbolic and heteronormative laws and constructions of femininity, female subjectivity and sexuality. Through enacting, embodying, and taking anarchic pleasure from sexed and gendered positions that those laws and constructions paradoxically institute, only to perpetually restrict, prohibit, or render impossible, female masculinity queerly and perversely re-institutes the possibility of pleasurably identifying with those very same sexed and gendered positions that have been foreclosed or excluded.

1.3 The ‘Female-Bodied’ Drag King

As a further preface to my investigations and speculations on female masculinity, as it is performed and embodied through the forum of drag kinging, it is important to further clarify from the outset how ‘drag king’ and ‘drag kinging’ is seen, understood and represented throughout this thesis. Because my emphasis throughout this thesis will be on the dynamics of drag kinging as they work at the intersection of the ‘female-bodied’ body and that body’s status as it is culturally, historically, socially and corporeally constructed and understood, I have chosen to focus on those performances of female masculinity that are located in female-bodied persons doing masculinity or being masculine strictly within the forum of drag king performances. I do not focus my research on the elaboration of female masculinity ‘off-stage’. However, I do acknowledge that some women engage in ‘outing’ their personal identifications with or desires for masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, and that some butch-identified lesbians also see drag kinging as a way to extend on and celebrate their butchness through their drag king personas.

I borrow the term ‘female-bodied’ from self-identified transman\textsuperscript{10} Jason Cromwell who employs it strictly for those individuals who acknowledge that their bodies are biologically female, but who may identify as transmen or only with masculinity. Whilst Cromwell only employs this term within a strict biological context, I employ it to place deliberate emphasis on the female-bodied persons who practice drag kinging and to speculate on the implications of what and how the female-bodied body as a meaningful (read gendered) body might create and influence the dynamics of drag kinging. Therefore, whilst I acknowledge the term female-bodied as a ‘biological marker’ I also employ it as a gendered ‘marker’ too (Crowell 1999, 30-32).

The deliberate focus on ‘female-bodied’ identified drag kings is meant to underscore this thesis’ interest in exploring and speculating on how and why female-bodied masculinity, as it is performed through the forum of drag kinging, can be so powerful, erotic and pleasurable for those performing it (and for those who view it through spectatorship).

How does the female body together with the experience of being female-bodied render the masculinity being performed and embodied powerful and erotic? Is the female body rendered, paradoxically, more visible for being ‘hidden’ underneath the masculine attire and accoutrements? If it is rendered more visible what impact does this have on the efficacy of drag king performances? Why does performing in male drag provoke such strong physical, erotic, and pleasurable reactions from those who choose to perform as drag kings? What are the embodied and corporeal effects of drag kinging, including the masculine clothes and accoutrements, and what might this mean for theories of embodiment and corporeality? What might new or speculative theories of embodiment mean for safe and trusted notions of ‘between-ness’ and dualisms, such as those between body and mind, the material and immaterial, or cause and effect? These are some of the questions that were raised when I began thinking about drag kinging and its performances and embodiment of female masculinity and these questions are further developed and explored throughout this thesis. Further, while (white, heterosexual) masculinity generally knows itself as non-performative, does rendering it performative through drag kinging – that is through both contrived performance and on a female body – have any symbolic or other impact? If so, what dynamics lie behind and directly dictate that impact? In addition, is there anything inherently transgressive about female bodies enacting and embodying masculinity? If there is, why? If there is not, why not?

\textsuperscript{10} Transman refers to transgendered man.
Knowingly being aware of the female body underneath the male drag appears crucial to the dynamics I explore and speculate on throughout this thesis, and this knowledge alone demands interrogation. Conversely, if there is no knowledge of the female body there would appear to be no dynamics; in fact, there is sometimes confusion, disbelief or, most tellingly of all, no reaction from audiences. Take, for example, Judith Halberstam’s experience of a young Asian-American drag king who was ‘so utterly convincing in her masculinity … that women were challenging whether she was ‘really a woman’’ (Halberstam 1998, 248). A completely different example of the importance of the female body to the dynamics of drag king performances occurred at a drag king contest I attended in Melbourne, Australia in 2000. The drag king was a transgendered male-to-female doing a decidedly ‘un-masculine’ drag king performance on a distinguishable male body, which rendered the drag king act ineffective and, from the palpably absent reaction of the predominantly female lesbian/queer audience, uninteresting. Whilst I can not be sure of all the reasons for this, I can definitively claim from my own experience and of those around me, that this performance was in no way erotic or sexually provocative and I would suggest this was because the masculinity being performed was layered over a clearly male body and simply held no interest for the lesbian audience.

Halberstam suggests that knowledge of the female body underneath the drag simply offers reassurance ‘that female masculinity is just an act and will not carry over into everyday life’. However, I would argue something much more nuanced is occurring, and consequently, a more nuanced investigation of why this knowledge of the female body is so important to the various dynamics of drag kinging that I will investigate in the thesis (250). Therefore, as a result of continually being confronted with the ‘reality’ of the female body to the efficacy of drag king acts and the effects of performing and embodying masculinity on those female bodies, the focus of my speculations and explorations was formed. Further, Halberstam’s analysis disregards the fantasies and desires, sexual and otherwise, of those women who choose to perform female masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, and this also demands investigation. What fantasies, for instance, may influence the desire to perform masculinity through drag? What desires lie behind the masculine persona being performed?

Admittedly, Halberstam has a spoken vested interest in her notion of ‘butch realness’, together, I would argue, with the unspoken assumption that it is more authentic and thus
somehow more oppositional. As she writes, ‘…butch realness … involves an active disidentification with dominant forms of masculinity, which are subsequently recycled into alternative masculinities’ (248). This subscribes to the view that only those who display and perform ‘butch realness’, as opposed to any drag king act of female masculinity, qualify as disidentifying with dominant masculinities and offering alternative masculinities. Rather than identify all drag king acts as disidentifying with dominant masculinities, which clearly they do since they are performed on and through female bodies, Halberstam inadvertently denies those drag king acts any efficacy or value. Further, such a denial and the categorisation of many drag king acts – aside from those of butch drag kings – as merely reaffirming gender binaries, ignores the potency and provocative nature of all female-to-male drag king performances for those women who choose to perform female masculinity through the forum of drag kinging.

Although it may seem problematic to differentiate between women doing masculinity and being masculine within and outside of drag king performances, it remains necessary to create and elaborate on any differences in order to confine and define the central proposal of this thesis. Because this thesis is primarily interested in investigating the importance of the ‘disappearing’ but nonetheless apparent and meaningful female body beneath the male drag, I focus my research on those women who pronounce, or otherwise make available, knowledge of their femaleness. This knowledge still forms the very basis of effective drag king acts. Further, this knowledge of femaleness, as previously suggested, remains fundamental to the dynamics of drag kinging that will be investigated, discussed and speculated upon throughout this thesis. In particular, many theoretical speculations or investigations I propose take their cue from advancing this knowledge of the female body. Proceeding from this knowledge, investigations into the incorporative capacity of the body lead to theoretical speculations on embodiment and corporeality. In some ways, these investigations and explorations renounce any definitive, ‘grounded’ or fixed body. However, when making sense of the effects, embodied and otherwise of drag kinging, the female body as it is culturally, historically, symbolically and personally constructed stubbornly remains the ‘point of reference’ from which meaning is often elaborated. Such constructions are not just ‘constructions’, but rather are actually phenomenologically lived and inform our very becoming and being – perhaps even more so for women. It is important, therefore, to remember that it is the ‘lived’ body that often dictates our sense of, in both meanings of the term, any experience we have, bodily or otherwise. This
proposal remains crucial to the theoretical positions I will be putting forward in this thesis.

Because I focus primarily on the role of the ‘known’, indeed, often pronounced female body in drag king performances of female masculinity, I delineate here between those female-bodied women who perform and embody female masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, and those female-bodied persons who identify as transgendered men, but who may also choose to call themselves drag kings. For transgendered men the label drag king often means more about ‘performing’ one’s self without having to consciously ‘act’. Within the context of identifying as a drag king, this delineation subscribes to personal notions of the masculine as a quality always already possessed. Del La Grace Volcano, as a self-identified ‘transman’ and ‘gender terrorist’, confirms this by stating that masculinity was a quality he already possessed, and that when he ‘donned a Drag King persona it didn’t feel like much of an act’ (Halberstam and Volcano 1999, 13, 21). Further, Volcano states that ‘what started out as a performance or an experiment became the reality of choice’ (27).

Within the context of drag king culture, this notion of masculinity as a quality always already possessed is also echoed in the suggestion by many drag kings that their acts and performances celebrate their ‘own’ masculinities as opposed to and distinguished from male masculinities. By employing the model of their ‘own masculinities’ for these drag kings, I borrow from, parallel, and am indebted to Judith Halberstam’s concept of ‘female masculinity’, a concept devised as an onslaught against cultural mandates that privilege masculinity as the preserve of men (Halberstam1998, xii). Halberstam proposes that masculinity ‘must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects’ (1). She convincingly and passionately argues that female masculinity is and can be, ‘masculinity produced by, for, and within women’ (15). Halberstam’s conception of female masculinity helps to situate and authorise the masculinities of those women who identify with masculinity both individually and through the forum of drag kinging. The assertion that drag kinging provides an outlet for performing one’s own masculinity will be further examined throughout the course of this thesis. For now, it is only important to establish that drag kinging as performance is often conceived and employed as a strategy for enunciating and celebrating this masculinity.
This distinction between female masculinity as performance and female masculinity as an inherently ‘natural’ trait may appear a very fine one if one adheres to the idea that all gender re/presentations are performance, but it is a necessary distinction to make if only to distinguish between those female-bodied persons who ‘act’ out masculinity(s) through the forum of drag kinging, and those who are masculine and do masculinity through the forum of transgenderism. To expand on this further, transgender identities such as Volcano’s base themselves within notions of masculine ‘realness’ as opposed to theatricality or performance, but Halberstam suggests that such masculinities only seem to be based in reality (Halberstam and Volcano 1999,127). For her, transgender identities such as Volcano’s remain inherently queer projects that continue a ‘poly-gendered scene of queerness’, rather than a ‘desire to live consistently as men’ (128). For me however, transgenderism is a more complex and contradictory project, despite and in addition to Halberstam’s queer claims that it expresses ‘the detachment of sex from gender’ and signifies ‘the production of new forms of embodiment’ (127). The fact that transgendered men may take hormones and/or live and ‘pass’ as men, suggests they seek to confirm rather than challenge notions of masculine ‘realness’ and authenticity, and Volcano’s comments would seem to highlight and confirm this. Indeed, transgenderists have an investment in their own masculine ‘realness’ that would seem to indicate a commitment to a gendered identification based on the dominant gender binaries on the gender continuum, rather than one that is inherently ‘queer’. As transman Jason Cromwell writes: ‘The gender presentations of transpeople are not drag … nor do they feel like performances’, and he goes further to state that transpeople’s gender identities are worn all the time and are an ‘essential part of their beings’, even though they acknowledge at the same time that gender is constructed (Cromwell 1999, 43):

On the one hand, transpeople conceive of gender as an internal, persistent identity such that transmen and FTMs have an identity referenced within society as male/masculine/man despite having female bodies and regardless of whether they alter those bodies via hormones and surgery. On the other hand, they recognize that their social identities are constructed through learning what behaviours, mannerisms, and speech patterns are marked for the culturally gendered category ‘men’ (43).

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11 In fact, at a lecture given on the aesthetic representations of transgendered bodies, Judith Halberstam mentioned how Del La Grace Volcano was undergoing the process of transitioning from female-to-male. This, I would suggest, further confirms Del’s commitment to his own sense of masculine ‘realness’, rather than a masculinity that only ‘seems’ real, or is based on performance. Judith Halberstam, ‘Under the Knife: Representing the Transgender Body in Contemporary Art’ (paper presented, University of South Australia, 3 April 2002).
Cromwell’s comments also appear to confirm that transmen and FTMs\(^\text{12}\) have an investment in masculine ‘realness’ by presenting themselves as, and believing themselves to be ‘male/masculine/men’; this is in direct contrast to the female masculinity being performed through the forum of drag kinging, where the juxtaposition of ‘female’ and ‘masculine’ is crucial to its efficacy. Further, ‘many FTMs and transmen feel they are being seen as their true selves in living, dressing, and behaving as men’ (39). Such comments then might seem to contradict Halberstam’s suggestion that identities such as that of transmen are inherently queer. Further, labelling such identities as queer might, in fact, be seen as a type of censuring of the transman’s own agency and voice in shaping the meanings of his own body, gender and sexuality.

In contrast to this, and proving insightful in relation to differences between transmen masculinities and the drag king masculinities I investigate, are Halberstam’s discussions on ‘masculine difference’ (Halberstam 1998, 3). By suggesting that masculine difference can be detailed not by comparing men and women, but rather by comparing butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals, for example, she subscribes to a ‘degree of indifference’ to male masculinity, and promotes the concept of ‘multiple forms’ of female masculinity (1998, 3, 9). Such a concept proves useful and significant when applied to the drag kinging I am including and not including in my investigations, if multiple forms of female masculinity here means all ‘female-bodied’ masculinities. Proposing this meaning not only enables the term female masculinity to encompass both transmen (who may or may not choose to be categorised within this term) and other female-bodied masculinities, but also permits me to contextualise and differentiate between those female masculinities too. Whilst not wishing to ‘taxonomise’ genres of female masculinity as Halberstam does, I do argue for a differentiation between the ‘male/masculine/men’ referenced identity of transmen and the female masculinity performed, corporealisied, and embodied by drag kings.

**1.4 She’s a Great Looking Guy**

Whilst the previous deliberations on transgenderism are not directly relevant to the drag kinging I propose to investigate and speculate upon, and such discussions do not seek or

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\(^\text{12}\) Female-to-male transsexuals
wish to pass judgement on whether transgenderism as a practice is queer or not, they are included here only to distinguish between those female-bodied persons who ‘act out’ and embody masculinity on and through that body – as a meaningful body – through the practice of drag kinging, and those who don’t. Employing the female body as meaningful suggests that it is understood, experienced, and continually becomes the ‘sexed’ or gendered ground upon which such acting out and embodiment take and have effect. For those who embody masculinity through the practice of transgenderism, the female-bodied body is not the ‘sexed’ or gendered ground upon which such masculinity comes to have meaning and effect, but it is simply acknowledged only as the biological body transmen were born with. As should be clear by now, such a distinction remains crucial when speculating on the dynamics that exist in the drag kinging I examine, because I will argue that many of those dynamics exist through and via the body of the performer (female-bodied) and the gender (masculinity) being performed, and simultaneously, inform and elicit many of the dynamics I will investigate, discuss and speculate on.

Although it might be problematic to employ the sexed body – the female body – as a ground, as something ostensibly ‘known’, it remains the stubborn, real and erotic reality on which many of the dynamics of drag kinging are played out, particularly since those dynamics are often located in a lesbian or queer space – perhaps already a seductive space – or where those dynamics can be ‘lesbianised’ by same-sex desires and fantasies. Foregrounding the female body as a ‘known’ body or ‘real’ body, is not to assume the ‘sexed specificity’ of that body as the ‘irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear’ (Butler 1993, 28). Rather it is to argue for both the materiality and constructedness of that body simultaneously. The female body then, is a kind of ‘point of departure’ here, but a point of departure that acknowledges the female body as both a sexed body that is a construction and one that bears cultural constructions (28). Further, my foregrounding of the female body is inspired by the drag kings themselves. Their personal narratives attest to the fact that the

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13 The emphasis here on female same-sex desires and fantasies is not meant to exclude the possibility that men might also engage in their own identifications and desires with/for drag kinging. However, because the theme of this thesis focuses on the dynamics of drag kinging within a ‘female economy’ of desire and identification, the emphasis remains confined to this, although it certainly doesn’t deny the erotic or sexual charge some drag kings get from being desired by gay male spectators. With that said, I still maintain that such eroticism remains within a female economy of desire, because in this instance I am explicitly interested in examining the eroticism and desire felt/experienced/elaborated upon by the women performing as drag kings to this ‘gay gaze’, and not the erotic experiences of gay men within the culture of drag kinging.
female body is both the reference point and the carnal dimension through and on which many of the dynamics of drag kinging are experienced, translated and interpreted.

Such strategic emphasis on the body will be interested in and pay as much attention to the phenomenal/corporeal body as to the discursive and socially produced body, and correspondingly, to the particular constructions or configurations of these ‘bodies’ through the practice of drag kinging, and the personal narratives employed to interpret and describe ‘them’ (Wilton 2000, 251). That is, I want to emphasise the importance of this relationship of the phenomenal/corporeal body to the discursive/social body, and vice versa, and together, that body’s encounter with drag kinging, and the attendant dynamics produced through that relationship and encounter. Here then, and borrowing from Wilton, we might also understand how a sense or ‘feeling’ of ‘self’ in drag is produced by ‘the social acting through the body’ and how ‘self’ in drag is itself acting through the body (251). The emphasis placed on this dynamic relationship is foregrounded throughout the entire thesis, but principally in the chapters ‘Queer as Camp. Camp as Queer’, ‘Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment’, and ‘And the Dress was made Flesh’.

In ‘Queer as Camp. Camp as Queer’ I primarily employ theories of Camp as formulated by Moe Meyer (1994), and take the liberty of loosely categorising other theories of performance, identity and sexuality through a Camp lens. These include theories formulated by Emily Apter (1996) and Jonathan Dollimore (1991). Quick to disdain theories of Camp that solely promote Camp as a type of ‘sensibility’ and as apolitical, Meyer argues for Camp as queer practice informed by and in the service of a queer identity. By expanding on Meyer’s arguments that queer identity involves self-reflective performances of identity, rather than any appeal to ‘natural’ or essentialist bourgeois ideals of identity, I arrive at the notion of the subject taking itself as object in order to be a subject. This leads to the argument, inspired by Apter, that performance – or ‘posing’ – is synonymous with identity and ideas of ‘self’. Expanding on Apter’s theories, I argue against the idea of performance as somehow corporeally inauthentic or not ‘real’, and put forward the notion that through such performances drag kings can corpor/realise their female masculine selves.
Largely inspired by first-hand narratives and my own speculations, I also apply theories of Camp and queer to highlight the paradoxically perverse appropriation of heterosexist and symbolic laws that drag kings invest in, in order to arrive at and derive pleasures from drag kinging. Rather than outright resistance to those laws, I suggest that the pleasures gained from drag kinging directly accompany those laws through a kind of perverse re-inscription and subversion of them. This proposal is largely influenced by Meyer’s careful discussion of queer identity and Camp as queer parody. With reference to Meyer’s discussion I suggest that the pleasures of engaging with female masculinity through the forum of drag kinging cannot be isolated from historical and prevailing discourses on masculinity and im/proper femininity. This relationship is elaborated on throughout this chapter to introduce the complex and disparate conditions under which the varied pleasures of drag kinging emerge, but also to highlight the contradictions and vulnerability of seemingly constant and stable discourses and laws on female subjectivity, identity, and embodiment.

Drag kinging, as a context and performance through and in which the female body may be re/inscribed and located, also informs and has tangible effects on the ‘very matter’ of that body, the experiences of that body, and the significance it has to the subject (Kirby 1997, 3). In particular, ‘Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment’ focuses on this in an effort to fully acknowledge and appreciate the very real embodied effects of female masculinity. Offering an alternative and experimental speculative analysis of those embodied effects, the chapter devotes itself to exploring and employing various theoretical models, which might not have originally been intended for such an analysis. Principally I employ Renée Hoogland’s (1999, 2002) arguments on embodiment as inexorably linked to and mediated by any prevailing social and symbolic rules to discuss how the embodied effects of drag kinging are, as a consequence of this, ‘contextualised’, and always remain dependent on contextualisation. The embodied effects of drag kinging then, are not independently arrived at as some kind of epiphanic experience. However, through such embodied experiences the body ‘shows’ itself to be both innovative and capable of possibilities not already envisaged or imagined. In this respect its incorporative capacities remain limitless and its boundaries fluid. In addition, I expand on the corpor/real effects of drag king performances by taking up Karan Barad’s (2003) posthumanist theories of the body. Barad reminds us that the materiality of the body often disappears or is ignored in
favour of language and discourse’s – representationalism’s – authority in deciding our ‘world’. Barad rightly promotes material bodies as being in direct relation with our world, not just in it, but of it. Material bodies are active participants in the world’s becoming – there is not a world and ‘us bodies’, but rather an engagement that defies notions of separateness or division. Employing Barad’s conception of the active, (always) becoming body, I expand on her theories to argue for a breakdown of traditional Cartesian relationships and directly challenge mind/body, subject/object and material/immaterial dichotomies, amongst others. Inspired by personal narratives, this chapter specifically questions notions of ‘between-ness’ with respect to any easy distinctions being made between such dichotomies, more particularly, the ‘dragged up’ body as representation and drag persona, and the self’s ‘real’ body. As Vicki Kirby argues, ‘between-ness’ is dependent ‘upon notions of discreteness’, and in drag king any such notions are continually being blurred (Kirby 1997, 52). Indeed, many drag kings are very specific when interpreting the ways their bodies perform, feel and are experienced through and as their dragged-up king personas, even though most of them initially suggested their drag king personas and performances were completely separate from them/selves. More particularly, it is how this dragged up and performing drag king persona is embodied that inspires the central challenges I set up and argue for in this chapter.

Barad’s insightful investigations into the inseparable relationship between matter and meaning are also expanded upon to argue for drag king embodiment as more than what it merely represents. Drag king embodiment, I will suggest, is a reciprocal relationship, not of cause and effect, but rather, an ongoing relationship where matter and meaning come to be determined through a mutual engagement – neither being comprehensible in isolation from the other. In Barad’s posthumanist vision matter and meaning are mutually articulated, and I adopt this line of thought in order to speculate on the very real embodied effects of drag kinging for those women who practice it. In addition, I borrow heavily from Vicki Kirby’s theories of corporeality to further emphasise the futility of imagining the body as discrete, and to focus more attention on the materiality of the body and its ability to materialise that which is traditionally regarded as mere ‘sign’ – or as immaterial. This exploration questions the supposed difference between the sign and the body that represents. Further discussion reveals how any easy reduction between body/mind and self/other, amongst others, remains questionable, if not
impossible. Like Barad, Kirby asks us to think the body differently. By carefully employing Kirby’s theories I am able to argue for drag king embodiment as a becoming that both rewrites the body and is a rewriting by the body. Not only does this suggest that there can be no differentiation made between representation and the body, but also how mutable the body is. This realisation is also explored through consideration of Kirby’s theories. By accepting that the body is mutable further speculations on the incorporative capacity of the body can be explored. By offering detailed accounts of Kirby’s examples of bodily dis-integrity to illustrate this, I argue even more forcefully for the futility of applying body/mind, self/other – even material/immaterial – dualisms to discussions and theoretical speculations on drag king embodiment. Further, to reduce such discussions and speculations of drag king embodiment to easy notions of cause and effect, mind over matter, or merely the body passively incorporating culture, is to refuse the passion and legitimacy of the first-hand narratives that seek to describe that embodiment.\(^\text{14}\)

Personal narratives inspired the theoretical threads I assume throughout ‘Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment’ and its sub-chapters. In order that the reader might understand why I sought out such experimental theoretical threads, I have included many of those narratives in this chapter to provide the reader with the opportunity to ‘listen’ to the drag kings themselves. Further, I take those same theoretical threads and apply them in the following chapter, ‘And the Dress was made Flesh’. Here, the embodied effects of dress and other accoutrements of drag kinging are examined. Following on from Barad’s posthumanist materialist theoretical framework, I examine and speculate on the impossibility of distinguishing between the body and the clothes that wear it and the clothes that the body wears. More importantly, I focus on the tactility of personal investments in the dress and accoutrements of drag kinging, that is, clothes as of the body rather than merely on or worn by the body. Cavallaro and Warwick’s (1998) insightful analysis of dress and the body offers scope to move beyond the traditional belief that the body is bounded and static, to arrive at the ambiguous relationship that exists between the body and dress, and correspondingly, the body and dress’s inherent mutability. This chapter devotes itself to specifically exploring the corpor/real effects of dress as experienced by some drag kings, with

\(^{14}\) In fact, at a conference I presented a paper at in 2001 I was duly pulled aside afterwards by a professor and told I should ‘speak’ for the drag kings as ‘they don’t know what they are saying’. In response I have duly resisted this.
emphasis on the bodily incarnation of desires for, fantasies of, and identifications with masculinity. Expanding on this I also employ Deleuzean ‘rhizomatic’ concepts of ‘becoming’ to further speculate on and legitimate the embodied experiences of drag kinging and to focus on the dynamism of the body. Rather than imagining the body as passively comp/pliant, this chapter argues for the body as productive, creative and engaged.

Drag kinging appears to offer those women who practice it positive, affirming, and often surprising corporeal experiences. That such experiences are often described and discussed within terms of liberation is telling. Such experiences, I will suggest, remain inseparable from the physical, sexual and gendered constraints placed on female bodies and desires within Western society and culture. Highlighted throughout the course of this thesis, if not always intentionally then as an undercurrent, those constraints inform many of the dynamics discussed and elaborated on in various chapters. In particular, direct reference is made to the constraints placed on female bodies and desires not only in the chapter ‘Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment’, but also in the chapters ‘Draggressive Women in the Camp’ and ‘ Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom: Queer Refigurings’. These chapters all acknowledge the inevitability and influence (in current Western culture) of those constraints on female subjectivity and desire. However, they also introduce the possibilities for, and already practiced ways women manipulate and ‘queer’ those constraints in order to satisfy their desires.

In particular, whilst ‘Draggressive Women’ acknowledges those constraints and their influence on drag kinging’s various dynamics, it also introduces and argues for the transgressive re-inscription of them. Borrowing the term ‘transgressive re-inscription’ from Jonathan Dollimore (1991), I introduce the dynamics inherent to Dollimore’s term in order to speculate on and argue for the astute and perverse employment of those constraints by drag kings and drag king culture, in particular the subject position of the ‘phallic dyke’ as proposed and theorised by Judith Butler (1997). Much like the Foucauldian analysis of power as productive rather than prohibitive, transgressive re-inscription operates through a kind of perverse manipulation and resistance of existing constraints, for example, heteronormative constructs and symbolic laws on female subjectivity, desire and sexuality. However, where Dollimore’s theory of transgressive re-inscription differs is in its claim that any form of resistance, whilst being considered
a product of power, is both censored and made visible. Because transgression and resistance are inexorably linked to the powers they resist, they become a threat to be suppressed and, simultaneously, become legitimated via this suppression. This legitimation, argues Dollimore, provides transgression and resistance with powers it was never meant to attain. Further, resistance is not measured by any utopian ideals that it is historically imagined to be in pursuit of, but rather, by the fact that resistance must be both cancelled out and contained by the powers that, paradoxically, created and legitimated it by considering it a threat. This dynamic, discussed through engaging with Dollimore’s theory of containment, is expanded upon to reveal the manipulative – or what I claim are Camp – manoeuvres drag kings engage in, in order to legitimate their female masculinity. Dollimore’s theory of containment recognises the paradoxical relationship that exists between dominant social constructions, for instance those on gender, and any contestation of them. Intrinsically unstable due to the destabilising force of the contradictions inherent to them, those constructions remain ripe for ‘queering’.

More specifically, in the chapter ‘Draggressive Re-inscription: The Outlaw turns up as In-law’, I elaborate on and appropriate the dynamics of transgressive re-inscription and apply them to the constraints imposed on female subjectivity in order to highlight how such constraints prove to perversely provoke many of the pleasures, erotic or otherwise, that are experienced by drag kings. By highlighting the proximity of female masculinity and those perverse pleasures to heteronormative laws on gender, identity, and sexuality, I speculate on the interdependent nature of female masculinity and those pleasures, and the laws that would consider them perverse or impossible. What this speculation reveals is that the masculine woman, or female masculinity, (mis)appropriates the laws that seek to govern female subjectivity and sexuality to effectively substantiate and legitimate that masculinity. By employing the Camp strategies previously outlined, drag kings engage in re-inscriptive techniques of misappropriation in order to experience the various pleasures of their female masculinity. Correlatively, I will argue that those laws remain equally and perversely dependent on resistance or misappropriation of them, because they must continually displace and exclude any perversion of them.

Further, by claiming that the pleasures of drag kinging and female masculinity are effected from within a queer female economy of desire, I borrow from arguments made
in ‘Camp as Queer’. The masculine woman (mis)appropriates prevailing concepts of female subjectivity, identity, and gender in order to move beyond them, not to transcend them. Female masculinity signifies in excess of cultural dictates that would regard that masculinity as abject or deviant, through ‘queering’ those dictates for its own purposes and desires. It is how the subject appropriates and uses what they are constrained by, subjected to or ordered by, which remains important. With respect to drag kinging’s celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity, the (mis)appropriation and perverse employment of heteronormative and symbolic laws and constructions of female subjectivity and desire is finally presented as an inherently Camp/Queer project.

The final chapter, ‘Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom: Queer Re-figurings’, extends on this and explores and speculates on queer female fantasies and desires. If the central theme of the preceding chapters focuses on the perverse appropriation and re-inscription of traditional discourses on female subjectivity and desire, ‘Fantasies and Desires’ seeks to move beyond this. Nevertheless, I do suggest that fantasy is created out of the social, because fantasy must be set against the social in order to be understood as fantasy. However, because fantasy exists as a result of this relationship – resides alongside the social – it automatically poses a threat to and reveals the vulnerability of the same. ‘Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom’ examines these two dynamics and speculates that fantasy operates in drag king culture through the tension that exists as a result of those dynamics and their relationship to each other.

Although I argue that the basis of fantasy resides in its inevitable relationship to social reality – that is, it can only exist in relation to that which constrains it and which it is created out of – I argue for new ways of ‘thinking’ desire that don’t rely on this (perverse) struggle with the social. Not being satisfied with traditional theories on desire based on notions of lack and incompleteness, I offer a decidedly Deleuzean and anti-psychoanalytic take on desire through explorations of other theorists, and my own speculations, in order to move beyond prevailing discourses on desire. Borrowing heavily from Elizabeth Grosz (1995), I acknowledge the constraints of both heterosexism and phallocentrism as effecting and provoking any violation of themselves when speculating on alternative theories of desire. Thus, desire is not theorised within utopian terms, as somehow transcending the realities of both. However, I certainly challenge and find wanting theories of desire based on and within heterosexist and
phallocentric terms. To this end, I specifically argue against desire, as it is understood within terms of lack, incompleteness, and elusive seeking and yearning, or, paradoxically, as goal oriented. More generously, I argue for desire along a model of connections, positivity, and productivity. This model is based on Deleuzean conceptions of desire, and as I see desire operating in drag king culture. Finally, I suggest that desire, within these terms, functions as queer or Camp as it is interpreted and discussed in the chapter ‘Queer as Camp’. However, ultimately, desire – more specifically female desire – is theorised and promoted not for what it represents or means, but what it makes and does, for what it produces and effects.

What I hope to promote and make clear through this thesis is that drag kinging, as an embodied and meaningful act, provides a powerful forum for extending the ‘frameworks’ which attempt to contain the female/lesbian subject, her body, and her desires. However, I also suggest it simultaneously remains a forum in which the sense of ‘self’, self’s bodily boundaries, and self’s desires, are necessarily both constrained and liberated at the same time. The inherently disparate and unreconciled nature of this exchange, far from creating or being an unproductive exchange, or an exchange that might be imagined as negative or counter-productive, is precisely the tension that creates and maintains many of the dynamics of drag kinging and drag king performances. Further, such a force also provides the conditions for many of the pleasures of drag kinging and its concomitant role as the site of multiple female desires.

1.5 In/forming the Parameters: ‘the researcher is always positioned within her own body’.15

In addition to clarifying my speculations on drag kinging and drag king culture, it is also important to establish how my approach to such speculations, and my subsequent analyses and interpretations, are informed by my own desires and experiences as a (one-off) performer, female spectator and fan of drag kinging. These experiences and desires become inseparable when speculating on, analysing, and interpreting drag kinging, working to inform each other simultaneously. In light of this, they are indirectly employed as a type of ‘reference point’ in that they almost certainly inform my speculations on, analyses and interpretations of drag kinging’s dynamics. With that said, I openly

acknowledge that any investigations, speculations on, analyses, and interpretations of drag kinging and drag king culture that I make, originate from within my own fascination with female masculinity, and its appeal to my specific desires. The above ‘admissions’ are not meant to imply that the dynamics of drag kinging are contained within or by my own desires, speculations on, or theorising of drag kinging, but that this admission bespeaks the possibilities of other lesbian/female identifications with and desires for drag kinging. In addition, and following Clare Whatling, the aim of my interpretations and analyses is ‘to expand the possibilities for lesbian identification and desire, not to proscribe new ones’, and indeed, to ‘expand the possibilities’ for other female desires (Whatling 1997, 5). With that in mind, one of the tasks of speculating upon drag kinging’s dynamics is to promote the possibility that one can project one’s own desires onto and into drag kinging by employing individual, but inherently queer appropriative and manipulative techniques. This is especially borne out by my very specific use of particular theories of Camp, but it is evident throughout the entire thesis. Such techniques can transform, disrupt and perversely act upon established and conventional discourses surrounding not only masculinity and maleness, but as also will be revealed, those surrounding female subjectivity, sexuality and desire.

Employing my ‘self’ to speculate on drag kinging’s dynamics then, is to insert my/self as a desiring subject into the analyses and interpretations that follow from such speculation. However, this is not to say that I do not employ the interpretations and subjective experiences of drag kinging as discussed by the women who engage in its practice. The insights that emerge from these narratives are ‘grounded in experience’, and although often at odds with the self and each other, such incommensurability bespeaks the honesty of those who so generously wrote their stories (Bordo 1994, 285). Those ‘stories’ though, do become refracted through and re/negotiated via my own interpretative frameworks and choice of theoretical paradigms, but rather than detract from or purposely distort those stories, my intention and hope is that such refractions and re/negotiations enhance the potential of those stories, and celebrate their legitimacy as multiple sites of polymorphous and active female and lesbian desires. I have sought through these methods then, to ‘create subtle interactions between the personal and the theoretical’, and hope that this avoids both the ‘rawness’ of personal experiences out-weighing theoretical insights or vice versa and the possibility that my speculations are just displaced representations and interpretations of my own responses to drag kinging (Halberstam 1998, xiii).
As a ‘footnote’ to my introduction it is important to note that although drag kinging is a predominantly lesbian/dyke sub-cultural practice, I don’t assume that all lesbians enjoy drag kinging, that it is only lesbians who are interested in performing as drag kings, or that it is only lesbians who take pleasure from watching it. I do however, maintain that as a predominantly lesbian/dyke practice, drag kinging, for that reason, attracts a predominantly lesbian/female audience.
2. QUEER AS CAMP. CAMP IS QUEER.

The Camp eye has the power to transform experience.

- Susan Sontag
  *Notes on Camp* (107)

…Camp cannot be said to reside in objects, but is clearly a way of reading, of writing, and of doing that originates in the ‘Camp eye’, the ‘eye’ being nothing less than the agent of Camp.

- Moe Meyer
  *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (13)

While there seems to be a prolific amount of theorising, interpretation and writing on Camp, all of it generally falls into two different ‘camps’ – albeit both offering strategies for resisting dominant, heterosexual culture: Camp as deviant style and sensibility, and Camp as queer praxis in the service of queer identity. Subsequently, it has also been suggested that to discuss Camp or to take Camp seriously is to betray its ‘campness’ – to betray its ironic and apolitical qualities (Hampl 2000, Sontag 1967). In contrast, other theorists assert that Camp and Camp practices remain inherently political. For these theorists both have always been and remain oppositional critiques of prevailing gender and sexual mores and codes, particularly as they are embodied in queer identities (Bredbeck 1993, Meyer 1994a, Morrill 1994). Whilst both assertions remain equally valid, in as much as both theoretical camps – pun intended – argue their respective ‘cases’ convincingly, each must also be read in light of the other in order for both arguments to gather and maintain momentum and meaning. In this context, or more precisely through this contextualisation, the ‘bickering’ that ghosts such arguments also, paradoxically, provokes the polysemic potential of Camp, and the possibility of many preferred meanings. Because the arguments proposed by both camps also highlight that any meanings assigned to Camp are and remain the effect of varied interpretations and readings, Camp can not be definitively or finally determined. The happy outcome of this situation is that for the present theorist of Camp it is not simply a matter of understanding or determining what Camp ‘means’ then, but how various theories of Camp can or may be used.
In an unintentional, but nonetheless productive move, the polysemic nature of Camp affords the user of Camp a very queer position to theorise from, and in this case, enables a flexible though theoretically committed approach to Camp and its relevance, or ‘use’, to drag kinging. In this chapter I consider drag kinging as a potentially Camp practice by positioning it not only within particular theories of Camp, but also within other theories of identity and performance that could easily be seen as theoretically ‘camped’ in Camp. Despite the risk of betraying the ‘anti-serious’ nature of Camp and being accused of taking drag kinging too seriously, I define drag kinging, in this chapter, as ‘female Camp’, to articulate drag kinging as a genuine female strategy for promoting and celebrating female desires, sexuality, and identifications with masculinity, over, above and outside heterosexist constructions of ‘proper’ feminine subjectivity. This also serves to challenge the misleading understanding that Camp is only available to gay men or can only be defined within gay male terms.

By proposing that drag kinging be recognised as a female Camp practice, I speculate on why drag kinging might appeal to those lesbian and queer women who practice and enjoy it, and this is highlighted throughout the entire chapter and through direct reference to personal drag king narratives. Those narratives should be emphasised over and above any of my own interpretations, for they highlight the importance of nuance and personal experience to any analysis that is considering exploring the appeal of drag kinging for those women who engage in it. Further, those narratives, as accounts of female desires for and identifications with masculinity, help to dictate the terms within which drag kinging might be considered and theorised as Camp. In this sense then, I place emphasis on particular frames of reference – drag king voices, drag king interpretations – when discussing the appeal of drag kinging and subsequently how drag kinging might function as a Camp practice. In short, any speculations and analyses of drag kinging as a Camp practice are simultaneously refracted through the voices and interpretations of the drag kings themselves, and the specific theories of Camp I employ.

Speculating on drag kinging’s appeal naturally provokes discussion about some of the dynamics of drag kinging, and the relation those dynamics might have to dominant discourses of heterosexual and homosexual constructions, masculinity, and im/proper femininity. Those discussions highlight both the pleasurable and playful qualities of
drag kinging, together with the more provocative, and what might be deemed ‘political’ qualities of drag kinging. Further, those qualities and any meanings attached to them or derived from them will be theorised and understood as inter-related, forming a tangled, complex, and often contradictory relationship that cannot be unravelled to reveal any one part of a whole. Effectively, I will argue that this ‘messy’ relationship is precisely what inspires and creates many of drag kinging’s dynamics.

Throughout his article *Reclaiming the discourse of Camp*, Moe Meyer argues for Camp as a specifically queer practice, directly informed by queer identity, and functioning at the level of queer performativity. In effect, Meyer claims Camp as, and defines Camp within, a ‘solely queer discourse’ (Meyer 1994a, 1). Camp is not simply a sensibility or style, but is embodied in and emerges through those identities that recognise that the enactment of those identities is based on ‘performative practices and strategies … with enactment defined as the production of social visibility’ (5). That social visibility is only made possible, according to Meyer, through a self-reflexivity that is simultaneously based on the queer’s rejection of bourgeois models of identity, and the knowledge of identities of ‘Self’ as ‘performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylised acts’ (3). By situating queerness within this ‘performance paradigm’ (4), Meyer suggests that queerness emerges as a ‘praxical response’ and opposition to both essentialist and social constructionist models of identity (3). By basing queerness on the idea of Self as the *enactment* of Self, Meyer convincingly argues for queer performances as ‘not expressive of the social identity’, but rather ‘the reverse – the identity is self-reflexively constituted by the performances themselves’ (4). Queer identity emerges, suggests Meyer, ‘as self-consciousness of one’s performativity sets in’ (4).

By conceptualising queerness as a critique of those models of identity based on the opposing theoretical positions of essentialism and constructionism, and by arguing that queerness emerges as a direct response to and as a result of that critique, Meyer locates queer identity in/as the ‘epistemological rift’ that exists between those opposing models (3). In challenging the ‘epistemological frames’ that stabilise such models of identity, queer denies and rejects the ‘differences’ upon which ‘identities have been founded’ within those models (3). By constituting subjectivity on a model of the performative and discontinuous Self, as opposed to a model of the abiding, unique and continuous
Self, queer proposes then that any and every identity involves the enactment of that identity and therefore depends ultimately upon ‘performative gestures’ (4). Those ‘gestures’ constitute ‘both the identity and the identity performance’, and as such, are deployed so that social visibility can be and is produced (4-5). Contained within this paradigm is the insistence that social identities must always be ‘accompanied by some sort of public signification in the form of specific enactments, embodiments, or speech acts which are nonsexual or, in the very least, extrasexual’ (4). In this sense, queer identities are more aligned with various gender identities, where gender is defined as those stylised postures, gestures and ‘acts’ that a body must produce and perform in order to constitute and manifest a gendered self. To be comprehended, embodied and experienced, any identity, in the sense that it is enacted, is always located in and through ‘specific signifying codes’ (5).

Because Meyer defines Camp as ‘the total body of queer identity performance practices’, Camp functions as the ‘production of queer social visibility’ (5). Meyer posits Camp as a signifying system that encompasses and circulates ‘all queer identity performative expressions’, and thus Camp becomes/is queer identity and queer social visibility, and queer identity and queer social visibility becomes/is Camp (5). Further, by positing Camp as a signifying system and arguing against the definition of ‘Camp-as-sensibility’, Meyer can argue for Camp as functioning at the level of a ‘sign’. Rather than examine what Camp as word means, he asks us to theorise Camp at the level(s) of how it operates or functions. With that said, Meyer also differentiates between Camp – queer social visibility and identity - and the ‘camp trace’ – the ‘un-queer appropriation of queer praxis’ – and he is critical of any un-queer employment of Camp ‘performative gestures’ (5). Further, he argues that the camp trace only acts to stabilise Camp’s ‘ontological challenge’ to bourgeois notions of identity through a ‘dominant gesture of reincorporation’ that provides the un-queer with queer ‘access to the apparatus of representation’, and infuses the ‘the un-queer with the queer aura’ (5). However, such acts of reincorporation, ‘executed independently of queer self-reflexivity, are unavoidably transformed and no longer qualify as Camp’ (5). For Meyer ‘there are not different kinds of Camp. There is only one. And it is queer’ (5).

Meyer remains critical of Susan Sontag’s now infamous 1964 essay ‘Notes on Camp’ for promoting Camp as ‘sensibility’, whilst minimising the ‘connotations of
homosexuality’ in Camp, and dismissing ‘the homosexual’ as a ‘binding referent of Camp’ (7). Along with the concomitant promotion by other writers – both gay and straight – of Camp as a sensibility, Meyer accuses Sontag and other writers of ignoring Camp as a specifically ‘homosexual discourse’, and, in the case of gay writers particularly, criticises them for not addressing and problematising non-gay and Pop culture appropriation of Camp (8):

While writers on Pop culture simply deny Camp as a homosexual discourse, finding such a construction contradictory to their arguments, gay writers seeking to reclaim the discourse of Camp through restoration of its homosexual connotations fail to address issues of nongay and Pop culture appropriation (8).

Along with its conflation with ‘taste’ or sensibility, Meyer argues that Camp has also become confused with ‘rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque, and travesty; and with cultural movements such as Pop’ (7). Further, by re-interpreting Camp as a sensibility, rather than as a ‘sign’, he argues that writers can avoid critique by insisting that ‘Camp-as-sensibility’ is indefinable as a concept and therefore beyond words.

By authorising Camp as a sensibility, along with the promotion of various kinds of Camp, Meyer claims Camp is reduced to an ‘empty universal term’, enabling it to ‘become whatever one wants it to be’ (8). In this context, Camp can both serve the purposes of the user, who becomes the ‘knowing subject’, and become exempt from criticism due to its ineffability (8). In addition, Meyer asserts that this ‘one way’ interpretation of Camp, embedded as it is with ‘objectivist methodologies’, also disregards and fails to acknowledge the possibility of a ‘different ontology embodied in queer signifying practices’ (9). He suggests that objectivist methodologies become problematic when they are applied to studying human behaviour because they inevitably transform human subjects into ‘objects’ of knowledge that are used to provide ‘sense experience’ for the observer (9). By interpreting and reducing queer ‘cultural expression’ to merely a ‘sensibility’ and as ‘sense-experience’ for the observer, persons ‘are reduced to ‘thing like’ status as their own knowledge and experience become rendered as a structure of neutral surfaces readable only by the observer’ (9).
In contrast, Meyer develops a performance-centred methodology,

...that takes into account and can accommodate *the particular experience of the individual social actors under study, one which privileges process, the agency of knowledgeable performers, and the constructed nature of human realities*. This approach provides a space for individual authority and experience that, regardless of different perceptions of sexual identity, envisions a power – albeit decentered – that is able to resist, oppose, and subvert (my emphasis 9).

This approach both acknowledges the agency of the individual and the performative nature of human identity, and, defying tradition, Meyer attempts a definition of Camp – albeit a flexible one that can accommodate ‘the many actions and objects that have come to be described by the term’ – within a theory of agency and performance (9). Further, he writes that Camp refers to ‘strategies and tactics of queer parody’, and suggests a definition of Camp based upon the ‘delineation of a praxis formed at the intersection of social agency and postmodern parody’ (9). Taking his cue from Linda Hutcheon’s postmodern redefinition of parody (1985), Meyer defines parody outside its conventional conflation with satire and irony, and argues for parody as the ‘manipulation of multiple conventions’ – an ‘extended repetition with *critical difference*’ (my emphasis 9).

The ‘derivative nature’ of parody and its dependence upon already existing texts and discourses in order to perform itself, is responsible for its usual disparagement – a disparagement that Meyer argues is ‘articulated within a dominant discourse that finds value only in an ‘original’’ (10). But by contesting ideas of singularity, Camp parody, as a ‘process’ rather than as a form, can, in this context, undermine and highlight both the intertextuality and power relationships between those who possess the ‘original’ and those who possess the ‘parodic alternative’ (10). Further, Camp parody also provides a way for the queer agent to offer alternative signifying codes into dominant discourses by ‘attaching them to existing structures of signification’ (11). Parody then, articulated through Meyer’s performance based methodology and Camp’s relationship to the dominant order, becomes a ‘process’ of queer agency and knowledge, whereby the queer social agent is restored to the scene of representation, and brought out from under the ‘cloak of invisibility’ in which dominant discourses of signification have kept the queer agent hidden (10).
Meyer’s insights into and critiques of traditional theories of Camp and parody, and his subsequent (re)definitions of both, aim to (re)classify Camp as a specifically queer ‘signifying system’ that both produces and makes visible queer identity. In addition, Camp as ‘queer parody’ – parody being reconsidered as a ‘process’ that both highlights and challenges the power relations between those who control signification and those who seek to offer ‘alternative signifying codes’ – is argued as the means by which the queer agent ‘is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility’ (11). This practice of entering into ‘existing structures of signification’ and offering alternative signifying codes through the process of queer parody, ironically relies on both acknowledging and resisting the dominant order’s power and privilege to control signification at the same time. Queer parody then, becomes both the means by which the queer agent can both enter representation and produce social visibility, and resist and subvert the authority of the dominant order’s ‘monopoly’ on signification (11).

Meyer’s vehement support of Camp and queer parody as specifically queer practices in the service of queer identity is admirable. However, by also slipping between Camp as queer and Camp as homosexual (read gay male) discourse to support his anti-sensibility and anti-apolitical arguments, it is not always so clear if his theories are wholly inclusive. Nevertheless, there is much in Meyer’s re-assertion of Camp as queer that can be exploited to argue for drag kinging and its concomitant dynamics as a specifically female Camp/queer practice. In particular, Meyer’s situating of queer identities within a performance paradigm, where the idea of subjectivity is based on the enactment of Self, highlights the necessity of any ‘identity’ to both produce and perform itself. Further, any identity, in order to be activated, experienced and understood, always functions through prevailing, dominant, or particular signifying codes and signs; there is no escaping the mobilising effects of these. Even if one thinks s/he can refuse to engage with them, s/he does so only by negation, and therefore remains irrevocably tied to them. The intentional appropriation of signs or signifying codes to represent and reflect identity, suggests consciousness of the enabling effects of signs and codes to effect an ‘interiority’ that until displayed exteriorly, existed only potentially (Meyer 1994b, 81). As Meyer reads Genevieve Stebbins, sign appropriation results in ‘placing before us the signification of exteriority … enabling us to outwardly express that which is … within’ (81). In other words, writes Meyer, ‘both the signifier and the signified’ are ‘located on
the surfaces of the body’, and interiority exists only as potential that requires ‘an exterior display in order to be activated and read’ (81).

Meyer’s careful re-evaluation and situating of Camp as a ‘sign’ that functions as both a queer signifying system and produces and makes visible queer identities, is a seductive theoretical advertisement. It promotes queer agency and authorial control. Camp as ‘sign’ and Meyer’s redefinition of Camp parody remain especially tempting for exploring or speculating on the female masculinity that is performed, embodied and identified with in drag kinging.

2.1 Virilité Femelle\textsuperscript{16} – incredible!

If you cannot invent the game, then you can certainly reshuffle the deck.

- Moe Meyer

\textit{Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp} (20)

This chapter begins with the suggestion that drag kinging treats masculinity as a ‘sign’ – ‘the sign being … that which replaces \textit{something for someone}’ (Rossi 1983, 139 my emphasis). Dominant discourses of masculinity assume that masculinity is a natural derivative of ‘male’, or is ‘part’ of what a male \textit{is}, as opposed to a ‘sign’ of maleness. To acknowledge that masculinity is a signifier rather than the signified, would mean acknowledging that masculinity is entirely unnatural. There is no natural ontological basis for masculinity, rather masculinity arises when and where it is signified. Signs of masculinity replace the signified – ‘male’ – thereby constructing, marking, and ostensibly ‘making sense’ of maleness. If masculinity is a sign, or more precisely a series of signs, then performing, representing and embodying them through drag kinging remains as equally a valid ‘doing’ of masculinity as any other.

By suggesting that masculinity be treated as a ‘sign’ and that drag kings promote that ‘sign’ through their own embodiments and performances of masculinity, I mean firstly

\textsuperscript{16} Female Masculinity.
to elaborate on the idea that masculinity cannot be ‘explained’ if considered in and by itself, but only in the context of its deployment, all the possible ways it is produced in society and culture, and of course, in the context of what it is deemed not to be.

Masculinity can only be ‘explained’ in the context of the ‘inventory’ of what masculinity is and is not in a given society and culture at any given time (139-40). Masculinity does not exist outside the signifying systems that designate what masculinity is – or isn’t. Secondly, I want to elaborate on the idea of female embodiments and performances of masculinity through drag kinging as both, paradoxically, operating through and taking meaning from those signs of masculinity circulating throughout our society and culture, but as issuing from and taking meaning from a female body that both refuses and denies that masculinity must be/is a man, and that masculinity must be part of what it refers to – a male.

What might it mean then to suggest that ‘signs’ of female-em/bodied masculinity replace male em/bodied masculinity, and for what purpose? Though personal meanings and ‘feelings’ of masculinity are not signs, those meanings and feelings of masculinity require ‘signs’ in order for them to be successfully exchanged between persons or within a culture, and to be ‘understood’ as masculinity. In this sense, all masculinities can be conceived as ‘signs’, as those masculinities stand for what ‘maleness’ is or isn’t, might mean or not mean, in any given society or culture (140). In addition, although those meanings and ‘feelings’ of masculinity might differ from society to society, culture to culture, signs of ‘masculinity’ are used for the same purpose: to denote, connote, produce and make visible whatever masculinity ‘is’, or indeed, ‘isn’t’.

In this rather simplistic attempt at asserting masculinity as a ‘sign’ I do not mean to reduce the complexities of what or how masculinity is experienced, lived or embodied by anyone to simply a ‘set of signs’, but what I do seek to emphasise is the imperative we have to make masculinity understood as masculinity. One must understand what masculinity might or might not be, what it might or might not resemble, together with an ‘idea’ or a concept of masculinity, to ‘know’ masculinity or to ‘feel’ masculinity – to embody and enact masculinities – or alternatively, to parody or critique masculinities,
as is sometimes the case in drag king performances. Drag king masculinities are always already shaped, performed, embodied and interpreted through and by those ‘signs’ of masculinity already circulating within culture and society. Those masculinities always contain and are embedded with ‘fragments’ of current and past meanings of masculinities of which the drag king is forced to ‘compose’ her/his own masculinity (even those drag king masculinities said to be composed against prevailing masculinities), in order to produce and embody the possibility of future or ‘alternative’ masculinities.

Like the bricoleur whose objects are created out of second-hand materials – ‘the debris and residue of other creations’ – and thus whose work includes disparate but always already articulated objects, the possibility and reality of female masculinity is always limited and in a sense pre-determined by the ‘signs’ of masculinity already circulated and circulating (Wiseman and Groves 1997, 79). However, like the bricoleur who ‘must make do with whatever is at hand’, but whose work also includes an ‘element of chance’ in the creation process, so drag kings have and give themselves the opportunity and serendipitous possibility of producing and embodying a whole range of female masculinities (79). Because drag kings create (and embellish) their own masculinities out of the ‘signs’ of masculinity that circulate throughout society and culture, it means that they reveal the possibilities of combining and ordering in different ways those previously and currently circulating signs of masculinity. They appropriate, claim and embody those signs as their own, even though such signs are used for the same purpose – to represent and materialise what we understand and legitimise as ‘masculinity’ – even the masculinity displayed or embodied by a female body.

In essence, whilst female masculinity through drag kinging does not necessarily change or alter dominant conceptions or ‘signs’ of what ‘is’ or ‘isn’t’ masculinity, it does, through a kind of negotiating, ‘dismantling’ and reordering of those signs, change the traditional organisation of masculinity so that it emerges from and is generated through female bodies – female bodies that create different and added dimension and meanings to masculinity by actualising signs of masculinity through and on those female bodies. It is in this sense then, that ‘masculinity’ should not be envisaged as anything other than a ‘sign’, in that as a sign it stands for all masculinities (even those whose masculinity is considered ‘wrong’ must still be understood as such under the sign(s) of masculinity),
including the ‘different’ or ‘other’ masculinity that emerges from and is generated through the female bodies that employ and thus deploy signs of masculinity.

The role of female em/bodied masculinity as a sign then, is to make that particular masculinity comprehensible, visible and ‘real’ to those women who do masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, and to those who watch and appreciate that female masculinity as an audience. It ‘replaces’ and displaces for these women that masculinity which is regarded as an inherent biologically determined male by-product and privilege.

As a blatantly crude analogy, in our culture a man may be born ‘male’, but to represent himself as a ‘proper’ and comprehensible ‘man’ a male is expected to present himself as ‘masculine’, and thus his masculinity becomes a ‘sign’, for it refers to and represents his maleness and we recognise that it does. Again, masculinity is undeniably a sign, for masculinity is not an ‘object’ in and of itself but the means by which the ‘proper’ male – the ‘object’ – makes himself ‘marked’ and real. Emily Apter succinctly extends on this idea by borrowing from Craig Owens’ writing on performativity and ‘posing’. Apter forces us to realise our reliance on the knowledge that ‘a subject … makes itself be by enacting (its own) objectification’ (Apter 1996, 18), or, as astutely observed by Owens, ‘the subject poses as an object in order to be a subject’ (Owens 1992, 215). When applied to the women who practice drag kinging, we might see that it is through their particular enactments and embodiments of various masculinities that female masculinity, or identification(s) with masculinity, comes into existence, along with the reification of those masculinities as signs of female em/bodied masculinity. This also subscribes, once again, to the view that whatever theories of identity one supports, in the end persons ‘must do something in order to produce the social visibility’ by which their ‘identity is manifested’ (Meyer 1994a, 4). To express and embody female masculinities, even if those masculinities are considered ‘improper’, alternative, or transgressive, drag kings must produce and participate in ‘signs’ of masculinity; they reinscribe through and on their bodies those qualities, performances, enactments and prevailing discourses of masculinity that are recognisable and understood as signs of masculinity – but with a critical difference.

Of course, there is nothing ‘new’ about female bodies displaying masculine ‘traits’, but that is not what I am attempting to assert or discuss here. What I am trying to propose and promote is a way of discussing female em/bodied masculinity through the forum of
drag kinging as different from and not reducible to signs of masculinity as they operate throughout our society and culture, acknowledging that in order to produce that female masculinity and make it ‘visible’, drag kings must manifest that masculinity through those prevailing codes or signs. I suggest the critical difference, albeit ambiguous at this stage, hinges on the interplay between masculine ‘signs’, as they are simultaneously embodied and thus real/ised as female masculinity, and as they are understood and consciously staged at the level of display and artifice. This once again plays on the queer’s knowledge and acknowledgement of identity – of Self – as located in and through enactment, through the deliberate manifestation of Self. However, it also suggests the possibility of a different ontology embodied in those enactments and manifestations, an ontology that can accommodate the agency of the subject and the reality of her experience of female masculinity (Meyer, 1994a, 9).

Here, there is a direct correspondence between ‘exterior signification’ and interiority; the relationship between exteriority and interiority is one of inseparability. However, it is also a relationship in which the two terms can act as either cause or effect (80). In defiance of humanistic values, which traditionally restrict interiority to cause and exteriority to effect, the subject’s conscious, self-aware enactment of female masculinity – her interiorly defined ‘exterior signification’ of that masculinity – can produce ‘interior states’ through particular compositions of dress, posture and gesture played out on the surface of the body (80). The collapse of the cause and effect relationship is also reminiscent of the paradox whereby the subject must pose as an object in order to be a subject. The important point to acknowledge here is the appropriation and recognition, conscious or not, of the sign – in this case, female masculinity – as simultaneously both signifier and signified played out on the surface of the body, and as both signified and signifier played out as ‘interior’ reality. In manipulating signs of masculinity, by semiotically and consciously re-presenting them, respectively, on and through female bodies, drag kings can construct, promote and ‘live’ female masculinity as an identity.

However, we can’t forget that female masculinity is undeniably attached to existing signs of masculinity. This is not necessarily a thing to be avoided – it couldn’t be anyway – but rather a condition to be exploited. As discussed previously, female masculinity, as a queer parodic practise, manipulates those existing structures of
signification, and realises that identity is based on enactment of them. Female masculinity does not pretend to express identity, rather identity is constituted, or ‘lived out’, by the enactment of female masculinity. This can be further explored by examining the role of the stereotype in female masculinities. I suggest that what also permits female masculinity to perform itself as meaningful, real and ‘do-able’, is its mediation through dominant or stereotypical signs of masculinity – and this might also include ‘non’ or ‘wrong’ masculinities, such as homosexual masculinities and ‘improper’ femininity. Further, by opening up the discourse of the stereotype – itself a traditionally fixed ‘sign’ that seeks to represent and particularise a person – the assumed materiality/reality of masculinity as ‘naturally’ originating in and from the male body is challenged. In addition, that examination is also employed to speculate on the complex but pleasurable negotiations with discourses and signs of masculinity that drag kings engage in to embody masculinity as female em/bodied.

By briefly examining and then borrowing from Apter’s hypothesis on the role of Orientalist stereotypes in allowing ‘turn-of-the-century … lesbian sexual identity to perform itself’, we might speculate that past and prevailing stereotypes of masculinity, including ‘non’ or ‘wrong’ masculinities, are also what allow female em/bodied masculinity to ‘perform itself’ (Apter 1996, 17). To ‘perform’ does not mean I am suggesting that female em/bodied masculinity is merely confined to the ‘theatrical’ in the traditional sense, but that to perform this masculinity is to ‘do’, to ‘be’, to ‘make’ female masculinity, and further, to acknowledge the circuitous relationship between the doing, being and meanings of that masculinity in actualising it (in often unique and surprising ways), for the women who perform as drag kings.

While briefly responding to the more ‘stereotypical’ discourses on the stereotype’s ‘negative reputation’ for reducing the complexity of the subject, Apter also focuses on the ‘performativity of the stereotype’, and its mobilisation as a ‘prop’ on which to fashion identities, making those identities conceivable, visible and ‘real’ (18). She writes of the stereotype as a performative gesturing, with ‘a theatrical flair for striking a pose, assuming a guise’ (18). Further, the performative nature of the stereotype also highlights its capacity for ‘pretending an identity into existence’, and although stereotypes are often seen as repressive and hackneyed, we might also look at them, like Apter does, as a mediating ‘prop’ for negotiating and performing identifications and
identities that can have various meanings and affects, as opposed to simply thinking of them as static or permanent characterisations that promote submissive and ‘docile’ bodies (18).

Apter discusses the employment of Orientalist stereotypes as a ‘means of partially or semi-covertly outing Sapphic love’ in early 20th century French feminist circles (19). Whilst not directly pertaining to the performance of female masculinity via the forum of drag kinging, Apter’s analysis of the role of Orientalist stereotypes as both an ‘erotic cipher’ for, and a means of performing, and thus making visible through enactment, ‘Sapphic’ love, can be used to speculate on the role of various masculine stereotypes as both a cipher for representing and ‘outing’ female em/bodied masculinity, and as a means of enacting and making visible, female erotic and other identifications with masculinity. (20). Apter writes that in the ‘act’ of ‘acting ‘Oriental’” as a form of ‘outing’ lesbianism in early 20th century French feminist circles, outing becomes not only synonymous with ‘putting on an act’, but reveals the ‘theatrics of passing crucial to the performance of …sexual identity, as well as to the idea of performance as identity’ (23). When women ‘act’ out masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, they can also act ‘out’ their own identifications, erotic and otherwise, with masculinity, not only for themselves, but to an appreciative and predominantly queer and lesbian female audience. Here, both drag king and spectator are engaged in making, ‘outing’, and interpreting female masculinity through culturally available constructs of masculinities, whilst simultaneously superseding those constructs in favour of specifically female constructions and embodiments of masculinity. However, there is always a complicit knowledge between king and spectator that acknowledges that in order to embody masculinity and make it meaningful on a female body, they must perform and ‘out’ female masculinity into existence, and in drag kinging this is, more often than not, achieved ‘through the transformation of originally conservative models’ and culturally available stereotypes. (24). In addition, Apter goes on to suggest that through their ‘extravagant psychic investments’ in Orientalism, French lesbians, were women empowered or accorded sexual license through association with the dominatrix characterologies attached to exemplary princesses, queens, seductresses, or women leaders of the East, but, more interestingly, their agency was enhanced by ‘being’ these avatars both on stage and off (24).
Here the ‘immense prestige of the historical stereotype’ embedded in ‘Orientalist phallic women’ such as Cleopatra and Sèmiramis, were irresistible to the French feminist lesbians who reappropriated them not only as a means of performing/outing their ‘Sapphic’ desire, but as a means of empowering themselves in everyday life (19).

Although such cross-cultural transvestism could be viewed as problematic, such powerful female figures, whilst made to ‘perform’ and represent the embodiment of Orientalist stereotypes, were both fetishised and mobilised to provide not only a ‘prop’ on and through which to perform, objectify, and eroticise Sapphic desires and identifications – to both ‘out’ and ‘pass’ as Sapphists – but also as a means of performing and thus identifying with and experiencing female empowerment and agency in everyday life (19). Here, and as is suggested of drag kinging, performing becomes synonymous with a certain ‘lived’ and felt subjectivity. Apter’s analysis of the role of Orientalist stereotypes in fashioning Sapphic identity extends on the idea of stereotypes as being both productive and affect(ed), rather than restrictive, subjugating and cases of being ‘true to type’ (23). Further, by examining the role of Orientalist stereotypes as simultaneously fashioning and acting/outing Sapphic identity and desire, she also challenges the idea of the essentialist nature or essentialist ‘core’ of stereotypes, by highlighting how claims to being ‘true to type’ are thrown into ‘definitional crisis’ when the acting or outing of an identity as an ‘ontological’ strategy relies on ‘essentialist typologies of enacted being’ that require the ‘wild mimeticism of affect’ (23). Here stereotypes are not really about immobilising the body but are more about mobilising the body – rendering the body as poseur and the poseur as integral to the notion of identity or ‘personhood’. In effect, postulating any identity requires a certain amount of posturing.

Although Apter doesn’t seek to deny ‘the repressive effect of the stereotype’s over-legibility’, in that stereotypes have been traditionally mobilised to exercise control over bodies in order to assign them a ‘place’ and to keep them ‘in place’, she does ask us to consider the idea of the performative nature of the stereotype and its function as a ‘prop’ on which to ‘hang a pose’. For the French feminists, this was the ‘pose’ of Sapphic desire and identity, and corresponding personal empowerment and agency in everyday life (18-19). I want to extend on this by considering the various masculine stereotypes performed by drag kings as referents and imagined ‘originals’ or models, from which
they fashion and experience their own, often contradictory, desires for and identifications with masculinity. Such experience through identification, and identification through experience, can function at the level of embodiment and come to occupy the status of the real, in the sense that references to models or ‘originals’ become displaced or discarded in favour of a specifically female em/bodied masculinity. Masculine stereotypes serve as a conduit for crossing over and into the ‘real’ of female embodied masculinity and for passing/outing female masculinity as ‘real’. The drag king is not simply about imitating masculine stereotypes; she/he is enacting through the body – corpor/realising – the objectification of the self’s erotic, carnal, and other identifications with masculinity. Drag king masculinities then, are not necessarily just about performing masculine stereotypes per se, or about performing and ‘imitating’ men, but are more the process whereby the enacting of such masculinities exceeds the conventions of the stereotype, and female (desires for and with) masculinity can be negotiated and embodied.

Whilst many masculine stereotypes – including homosexual stereotypes – may be, in Apter’s terms, ‘over legible’, they are certainly not necessarily repressive, but are in fact the opposite. For instance, the phallic and sexual power that many masculine stereotypes are believed to represent comes to be embodied by the men who perform them. Not only that, their physical bodies – especially as clothed or otherwise adorned bodies – both manifest and reveal the masculine stereotype as an aesthetic pose ‘purposefully mannered’, albeit a posturing that often seeks to mask that stereotype’s role in the ‘production of normative masculinity itself’ (Cohen 1996, 42). For women who do drag however, there is no need to ‘mask’ the stereotype’s ‘role’ in the production of female em/bodied masculinity; quite the contrary. Openly experiencing and identifying with those stereotypes through the forum of drag kinging at a performative and embodied level, may permit and orientate their, and their audience’s, many varied fantasies, desires, and relationships with masculinity. Further, although female masculinity is still semiotically regulated by masculine stereotypes, it is less bounded by the cultural regulations of masculinity that govern male masculinity (Hale 1997, 225). In some cases, being able to access and appropriate masculine styles and stereotypes through drag kinging, and being able to embody and identify with them, extends into the everyday lives of some drag kings, empowering them in ways that parallel and exceed the French sapphists that Apter discusses.
Clare, as drag king ‘Flare’, writes that she has found drag to be a release for her ‘male energy’; ‘drag allows my male side to have a physical voice and a physical appearance’. Melanie writes that as she has started to do drag more regularly, ‘it’s been a way to create a character out of a lot of my own characteristics and desires (for) masculinity that I didn’t necessarily want to be a part of Melanie all the time’. Jai writes that doing drag is a way of expressing herself, of ‘being true to myself’. She writes that what ‘started off as a joke’, became ‘such a cool experience because it was deviant, but so real and empowering’. Alex, her drag king persona, is ‘wild, reckless, sexual, fun and free’. He can be a ‘skateboarder boy or when I am with my partner it is more of a suit, shirt, tie, packing type of boy’ who is ‘quiet but likes women and using his pack’. For Jai, drag is a very ‘sexual thing’ where packing is ‘essential and fun’ and turns her on: ‘When I am in drag, I am more outgoing, and more confident inside, externally and in bed’. Being in drag ‘gets me hot, horny and I like it …. It is sexy, deviant, dynamic and fun’.

Through her many frustrating encounters with certain men, and their refusal to see where she ‘was coming from’, Devon has been inspired to perform Jake – ‘the typical angry white boy … an American frat boy’. She writes that this gives her ‘a better understanding of where these angry white boys are coming from’. Jake is a ‘real asshole and it’s fun to live that out and get it out of your system, to be a pig and flirt with girls …for me it’s fun because it is giving myself space to live out that aggressive side of me’. Devon, like many drag kings, is very specific about her drag king persona. She writes:

I take all the regular stereotypes and put them together to make this charming fellow. He does not respect women. He thinks all this PC (politically correct) stuff is bullshit, and he thinks the world is taking away his rights when they talk about equality and affirmative action. He reads Playboy and listens to hip-hop and rock music. He is very insecure because he views his role in the world based on being a tough white man, and so when people challenge his position, he gets very angry and wants to beat people up. When I perform as him, I throw my shoulders back a lot more, I stand with my legs spread and instead of looking down, I throw my head back a little, raising my chin. I don’t talk a lot, I say ‘sup baby’ to the girls, and I smoke. I don’t give a shit about anyone who wants to talk to me, and I look permanently pissed off. If girls talk to me, I flirt with them, but I don’t really give a shit about anything. I just want to drink my beer and get laid.
For Devon, performing Jake has both erotic and political outcomes: ‘Kinging is erotic to me because of the role-playing aspect to it. I like playing this tough asshole, knowing that when I get home I’m nothing like that’. The ‘political reasoning’ behind playing Jake is ‘more confusing’: ‘Jake is a stereotype and I know it. He is the epitome of what I hate about typical gender roles. He is so sure of himself as a ‘man’ because of what he has been told by society, and because of his ability to shit on women to prove his superiority …. (he is) so self-righteous and angry at the world’. By performing Jake and taking on such a repellent identity, Devon feels that she can understand ‘more of where (men like him) are coming from, and I can be in their shoes’. As a result of this experience through identification, and identification through experience, Devon feels that when confronted with ‘someone like Jake’ she is more able to interact with them.

Echoing these sentiments is Pelvis Parsley who writes:

Taking on male personas has become far more than a performance for me, it has become a way for me to shift all of those rigid boundaries and overcome the fears I have of masculinity – my own masculinity and that of men I have feared (Koenig, 2002:157).

Pelvis’s embodiment of masculinity, and conversely the embodiment of her fears of masculinity, results in her both constructing and de-constructing masculinity simultaneously, allowing her to better understand and celebrate her own masculinity, and like Devon, contain and overcome her fears of other masculinities by dis-empowering them through performing them. Like Devon, ‘P’ is also very specific about her Drag king persona Eduardo:

Eduardo is a latino home boy who is originally from Cuba. He lived in L.A for a while and is now hangin’ with the crew in London. He wears baseball caps, has a very neat beard and loves his L.A Kings shirt. He is into George Michael, and is actually gay, but don’t tell the crew coz he really just wants to belong …. He likes to lip-synch to George’s songs, and play his stringless silver guitar.

Although performing Eduardo is highly political for ‘P’, it is also an erotic experience:

I find it exciting that some people actually think I’m a young guy…. Its [sic] total gender fuck, very erotic…. For me some of the power (of performing as a drag king) comes with the anonymity of it all …. It (also) allows me to be quite aggressive at times, and allows
me to approach people and totally freak them out, coz [sic] Eduardo can look quite intimidating …. And it’s great having women screaming at you, ‘I want to have your babies’ – very empowering …. (Eduardo) is into shameless self-promotion.

Performing Eduardo has given ‘P’, as a self-identified lesbian woman, the opportunity to subvert gender norms ‘by being a man’ at an embodied level. Writes ‘P’, ‘I would probably be a lot more like Eduardo in every day life if society was more accepting of gender difference …. I love being a really spunky homo home boy!’ For ‘B’ performing as drag king Damien Venture is an extension of her sexual identity as a butch dyke. When in drag s/he writes ‘I feel like I make sense when my body matches my own perceptions. I like how I look and how I feel as a man’. ‘B’ describes Damien as:

a bit devilish … a bit of a joker, likes to play and flirt, (and) has become more receptive to flirting with members of both sexes … (he’s) a bisexual biker boy. He loves motorcycles, particularly Harley Davidson’s, and is actually a motorcycle mechanic by profession.

Performing a drag persona that ‘B’ describes as ‘flexible’ – ‘he can be very masculine and butch, and other times he is more ‘faggish’’ – has given ‘B’ the opportunity ‘to explore different types of masculinity’ which carry over into her own life: ‘The ‘gay boy/leather boy’ thing is something new being incorporated into my life as well as my drag persona’. ‘B’ concludes that Damien ‘has developed and grown as I have, and he is pretty much an extension of myself … I feel that Damien is becoming more of a reality in my life, and it makes me feel good to know I have the opportunity to explore him (through drag kinging).

These drag king experiences through identification and identification(s) through experience with specific – one could say stereotyped – masculinities at an embodied level highlight the inherently aesthetic processes – the ‘poses’ – that the subject must literally constitute themselves by in order to be socially visible, although this is not to say that such ‘posing’ is inherently inauthentic or not lived as ‘real’. In fact, supporting Apter’s notion of performance as identity – identity being synonymous with ‘some sort of public signification’ (Meyer 1994a, 4) – posing becomes the means by which drag kinging can enact female masculinity. Posing, in this context, also allows drag kings and masculine-identified women to engage with the corpor/reality of their female masculinity. This affords them the opportunity to identify with their own desires and
identifications with masculinities at a deeply personal bodily level. It also provides them with the possibility of engaging with other and ‘as yet unsuspected modes of being’ (Diamond 1996, 2).

The above experiences also illustrate how some stereotypes are invested with multiple meanings, desires, fantasies and ‘uses’ – which is starting to sound like a very Camp practice indeed. In drag kinging, those meanings, desires, fantasies and uses go beyond the conventional discourses of the stereotype, and also resist, what I term political ‘clean-up’. Although it is undeniable that female appropriation of masculinity is often considered a travesty, at the same time, female masculinity is largely immune to the cultural dictates and constraints that regulate male masculinity. Not being restricted by such regulation means drag kings are free to engage with masculinity within their own set of personal and erotic constraints and fantasies. For instance, Devon’s drag king character, Jake, is an embodied critique of the ‘angry white straight male’, but also an erotic bodily experience where ‘move(ing) my body in a tougher, more take-up space sort of way’ is ‘exciting’. For Devon performing Jake is both embodied political comment and critique, and erotic role-playing. Although Jake ‘does nothing’ for her desires – ‘I hate men like Jake’ – being in (masculine) drag ‘is a way to act out the masculinity’ (tough, unafraid to take up personal space, particular bodily movements and comportment), that she ‘is so attracted to’. Besides, she likes to be known for being ‘pretty fucking hot as a boy’. Although Devon critiques masculinities such as Jake’s, she also gains, through her embodiment of and erotic desires and fantasies around certain masculine stereotypes, some of the supposed privileges of such masculine subjectivity. Devon distinguishes between Jake as a character/stereotype and simply ‘being in (masculine) drag’, to reconcile her desires and fantasies around performing and embodying a specific masculinity.

For ‘B’ performing drag king Damien has seen the blurring of lines between her character and herself. Although she asserts that masculinity ‘is a performance’, that a ‘large part of (her) likes dressing up as a man simply to prove that (she) can’, ‘B’ also writes that she likes how she looks and feels as a man. For her ‘wearing men’s clothing’ is enjoyable: makes her ‘feel comfortable’. For ‘B’, Damien is ‘becoming more of a reality in my life’. Here there is a distinction between the idea of masculinity as pure performance and female masculinity as embodied experience, but in reality there is a
blurring of all distinctions and a double gesture; as ‘B’ herself writes, ‘Damien is not just a drag character’, he is an extension of her/self. ‘B’s’ continued embodiment of masculinity – as perceived and constructed by her own fantasies, desires and identifications with various masculinities – at an ‘every-day’ level, and away from a performance based context, still highlights the self-conscious enactment of masculinity that ‘B’ literally embodies, must embody, to literalise her female masculinity. However, ‘B’s’ masculinity is no less ‘real’ for being self-consciously embodied and iterated. If anything it is more valid for being self-consciously and aesthetically shaped and embodied. Whilst ‘B’s’ female masculinity threatens ontological notions of personhood by revealing the processes by which we come to ‘be’ and exist as subjects, it articulates and highlights that the ‘real’ of embodied experience is comprised of and embedded with the cultural, social, and historical discourses that surround us, together with the deeply personal investments we make and have in them.

In drag kinging, the performance of masculine stereotypes – invested as they are with particular fantasies, desires and identifications – might also be thought of as a ‘sign’ of some/thing that needs acting out(ing?) in order to be made visible and meaningful – to be corpor/realised. Within the realm of kinging there is a circuitous effect, or perhaps more correctly, an interplay between artifice and subjectivity. Masculine stereotypes, consciously and intellectually understood as ‘signs’ of masculinity, are literally enacted – are acted out – reinforcing the performative, posturing and affected nature of all stereotypes (of all identities?). At the same time, performing, posing and affecting those masculine stereotypes literalises female em/bodied masculinity and makes it ‘real’ by simultaneously making itself ‘seen’. The drag king poses as (and is) an object in order to be a (female masculine) subject for her/himself and the audience watching and engaging with her/his performance (I employ both personal pronouns here because the majority of drag kings prefer to be addressed as ‘he’ when in drag). The emphasis here is on the ‘making (of) oneself’ and ‘making oneself seen’ simultaneously; the enacting of self-objectification as ‘subjectification’. The female masculine self is acted/outed and that self is acknowledged and celebrated by her/his audience (Owens 1992, 215).
2.1.1 To be natural is such a difficult pose to keep up.

The performance of masculine stereotypes is popular in drag kinging, and the choice to perform them is, I suggest, twofold. Drag kings, as queer and lesbian women, are always and already aware of the reality of having to *consciously* perform the self ‘into existence’, more often than not through manipulating and affecting the ‘signs’ and models of identity already circulating and available. Secondly, the appeal of masculine stereotypes, such as the playboy, cowboy, military man or tough mechanic for instance, lies in the knowledge that they too require self-conscious enactments of self-objectification, which are simultaneously purposefully performed to ‘pass’ as non-deliberate or ‘natural’ ‘signs’ of masculinity. The stereotype then is ‘made pure performative’, and is at once both fantasised and animated through embodiment and pose (Apter 1996, 19). Could we think of the body as poseur? The word ‘poseur’, according to the dictionary, means to ‘behave in an affected way’, and Apter’s analysis of stereotypes as providing the ‘prop’ on which to pose, act and ‘out’ identity, certainly highlights that ‘passing’ off/as an identity requires mimetic affect(ation), and continues to support the idea of ‘performance as identity’ (23).

The fascination with performing certain masculine stereotypes for some drag kings is also twofold. Firstly, and as previously discussed, such stereotypes may anchor the erotic and other fantasies they may have for and about masculinity, and secondly, those masculinities are often, or have been, esteemed, revered, or privileged in some way within western culture. For these reasons alone it is not surprising that drag kings would choose to perform such symbolic figures of phallic power and prestige to objectify their own, varied desires for and identifications with masculinity. Embodied through drag king performances, such masculinities come to aesthetically and literally represent female fantasies and identifications with masculinity precisely because they are culturally idealised ‘signs’ of masculinity and manhood. The phallic power – and in conjunction with this, the sexual power – that such masculinities are believed to both represent and embody, come to be embodied by drag kings and are predominantly felt as empowering and erotic experiences.

Drag kings and their audiences are aware of the performative and poseur nature of masculine stereotypes; their allure and appeal, their obvious self-objectifying and self-

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conscious narcissistic reputation, make them ripe for appropriation and erotic identification and play, both ‘on stage’ and off. For instance, Clare’s drag king persona ‘Flare’, based on ‘mimicking young gay men’, would love to look like Marky Mark – the epitome of youthful, narcissistic, virile masculinity – ‘in a second’. Clare writes that when she is in drag she ‘could spend hours looking in the mirror … so long I could turn into a pile of salt’. Flare, she writes, ‘is very vain about his looks’. When Clare performs Flare she says her ‘whole body feels high’ and that performing in drag ‘is orgasmic’. Although she initially indicated that Flare – who is all about having fun – and Clare – more serious and ‘political’ – were ‘different and therefore separate’, she later wrote that in reality she could ‘never truly get away from Flare’ and that they co-existed and weren’t as separate as she thought. Melanie, whose drag king persona is Jake Dangar, likes to perform ‘cool Frank Sinatra’ songs, including ‘over-the-top angst filled love songs’. In addition, Melanie’s drag king troupe ‘Disposable Boy Toys’ fashion themselves on current boy bands, notable for their narcissistic and youthful masculinity and their appeal to younger female (and gay male) audiences.

In addition, drag kinging and drag king culture provides a forum where acting or performing masculinities can also provide a means of simultaneously ‘outing’ the libidinal, erotic and other identifications that women might have with masculinity, and as a means of exaggerating through performance, individual constructions of the masculine self, suggesting that any form of ‘outing’ female desires for, and identifications with masculinity is ‘thoroughly consonant with putting on an act’ (Apter 1996, 20). For instance, Sam writes that although she would normally be labelled a ‘butch dyke’ – something she doesn’t necessarily call herself – and that Mr Big, her drag king persona, is not ‘all that separate from who I am in everyday life’, performing him provides the opportunity to ‘take the stereotypical masculine sides of my personality, and beef them up a bit’. Performing as Mr Big ‘allows’ Sam to be herself ‘in a different way’. Elon extends on this by suggesting that both her drag king personas, Roy and Spencer, are ‘pieces of me – amplified – turned up to eleven …. I like to give a loud voice to my masculinity’. She further writes that performing Roy and Spencer, is ‘really a matter of being the masculine parts of me – even the faggotty masculine parts, but just a little more’. Sam’s drag king persona is informed by her desires and fantasies around ‘crazy rebel boy’ masculinities such as the ‘small time swingin’ gangster’ or ‘a fast talkin’, slow dancin’ cowboy’. Elon’s drag king persona, Roy, is informed by working class masculinities where ‘the boys I knew listened to
death metal and drank cheap beer’. Roy is ‘a hick, a bad-ass, the type reflective of the
guys I went to high school with’. Spencer is ‘more of a fag. He’s nerdy and sensitive
and funny, he’s a lot more fun to be around’. Perhaps Elon’s drag king personas, as
stereotypical masculinities in their own way, and the pleasures she derives from
performing them, are informed by the possibility that such stereotypes work in relation
to and in contrast with each other, giving added dimension, meaning and effect to her
performances. As Elon herself writes about her drag kinging, ‘I like that it’s queer and
masculine’.

There is no distinct or discrete way that women do drag kinging, or perform as drag
kings; their *raisons d’être* for doing drag are as varied as the drag king personas they
perform and embody. However, many women see and discuss their drag kinging as a
conduit or forum for expressing and embracing those parts of themselves that they
consider masculine. Further, I think it is reasonable to suggest that kinging is also a
conduit for negotiating those individual female fantasies of, desires for, and
identifications with masculinity(s). Doing drag gives women the opportunity, in an
accepting, and more often than not celebratory environment, to simultaneously
conceptualise and realise through performance and embodiment, their own, personal,
and sometimes complex relationships with masculinities, and their own female
masculinity.

### 2.2 Kinging goes Camping

I would like the world, and pay attention to the way I’m saying it, I would like the world not to
change so that I can be against the world.

- Jean Genet, *Gay Sunshine Interviews* (1978)
In Jonathon Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (319)

Positioned within the context of Meyer’s redefinition of Camp as queer parody, I would
suggest that female em/bodied masculinity, as it is accessed and performed through drag
kinging, is a queer parodic practice. That is, female em/bodied masculinity is both
derivative of and perversely transforms dominant discourses of masculinities, making it
simultaneously dependent upon those discourses for its visibility, meanings, and varied
interpretations, and subversive of them. Rather than viewing this dependence upon dominant discourses as an inherently ‘negative condition to be overcome’, it is in fact the ‘very strength to exploit’ (Meyer 1994a, 12). Female masculinity, along with all its various meanings, pleasures, and dynamics, exists all the more for being in the ‘same place’ as those dominant discourses. Female masculinity, in all its guises, but especially as public performances through the forum of drag kinging, functions as a subversive vehicle that introduces alternative – ‘queer’ – masculine signifying codes into dominant discourses of masculinities (13). Not only that, but by experiencing erotic and other pleasures from doing so, those performances provide masculine-identified women, drag kings, and their fans, with the power and authority to control the interpretation and value of female masculinities for themselves. Within this context, prevailing or dominant (read negative) discourses on female masculinity – be that women in masculine drag, or lesbians, who by heterosexist definition are often automatically associated with masculinity – lose their power to exercise control over the signification and significance of those masculinities. For those women who celebrate and perform female masculinities through the forum of drag kinging, and for those who admire and appreciate those performances, female masculinity becomes embodied and redefined according to their specific ‘codes of taste’ and desires (13). More importantly, it is the processes by which female masculinity is re-signified, desired, found desirable and ‘lived’ that remain significant to the dynamics of drag kinging. It is their simultaneous appropriation, manipulation and perversion of prevailing discourses and signs of masculinity – including ‘improper’ femininity – which allows drag kings and their audiences to engage in the queer practice of female em/bodied masculinity.

Female masculinity – in all its various guises – still operates through the signs of masculinity(s) already circulating within our society and culture, and must continue to do so in order to be made meaningful as female masculinity and as a queer parodic practice. And whilst I don’t seek to reduce the complexities of female masculinity to merely a ‘sign’ in the traditional sense, female masculinity can never be embodied, enacted, ‘known’ or ‘felt’ (or ‘understood’), beyond its mediation and interpretation through the discourses and signs of masculinity that already and currently circulate. In this sense then, female masculinity and its performance and embodiment through drag kinging both reflect and are bound to those dominant structures of signification that decide what masculinities are or are not, how they are or are not represented. However,
just because female masculinity is both refracted through and references those signs of masculinity, does not mean that women cannot access and advance their own masculinity. Further, as a queer parodic practice, those women can embody and interpret that masculinity as specifically their own, and, along with their audiences, establish and authorise the value of those female masculinities in defiance and subversion of dominant heterosexist economies of desire, signification and authorisation.

Within the culture of kinging, female masculinity becomes a performance in which dominant discourses of masculinity are only ever effaced, not utterly erased. Like the definition of a palimpsest, in which the original writing on a manuscript has been incompletely erased to make space for the new, but where traces of the old writing, though tenuous, are still faintly visible, so the drag king performance, to be dynamic and meaningful, capitalises and relies on this same interaction of presence and absence (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 153). This also recalls the actions of the bricoleur, whose creations are always marked by the inclusion of other previous and already articulated objects. The dynamics behind the significance, effects and interpretation of female masculinity for the individual and her audience can never cancel out completely their reliance on prior and current discourses and signs of masculinities. This includes ‘improper’ femininity, which, by definition, is associated, ironically, with both an excessive and deficient masculinity. Those dynamics neither seek to deny that reliance, but nor do they leave them unperturbed.

Drag kinging and the dynamics it creates and elicits, cannot refute or ever completely erase the recognition and meanings of all masculinity(s) as imitative of, or a product of, predominantly heterosexist discourses and representations. They ironically render them visible and invisible at the moment when the values of those discourses and representations are reassigned as something ‘other’ in and through the act of drag king appropriations and individual and audience responses to the performance of those appropriations (Meyer 1994a, 15). This particular dynamic should not be viewed as a ‘trap’ that confines the meanings and interpretations of drag kinging and female masculinity within an endless acquiescence to and rejection of heterosexist discourses and constructions of masculinities, but rather, as crucial to the expression, admiration, and positive reception of female masculinity. Drag kinging, as a meaningful
performance of female masculinity, both complements and disrupts dominant and prevailing discourses and constructions of masculinity and ‘im/proper’ femininity. It is precisely this perverse proposition, as a type of dialogue, that is played out simultaneously as (deviant) identification with and perverse defiance of, rather than strict opposition to, those discourses and constructions. It is this dynamic, I suggest, that imagines itself as more ‘threatening’ and transgressive, and therefore more perversely pleasurable. It is the proximity of female masculinity to dominant discourses and heterosexual structures of genders (and by association sexualities), I would argue, rather than outright resistance to them, that accompanies the idea of ‘threatening’ the authority and value of those discourses and structures, and provokes the ‘thrills’ that drag kinging provides for both performer and spectator.

Through their paradoxically perverse appropriation of heterosexist constructions of masculinities through drag kinging, and the attendant pleasures derived from embodying and enacting those constructions, drag kings indulge in being, and highlight how they are, both the object and subject of such discourses. As the object of such discourses ‘female masculinity’ or the ‘masculine woman’ is considered oxymoronic but at the same time is constructed and appropriated as the ‘other/ed’. Being purposely constructed as the other serves to construct and support the ‘self consolidation’ and supposed stability and ‘sense of self’ on which heterosexual identity, masculinity and ‘proper’ femininity are dependent (Whatling 1997, 4). However, by engaging in performances of female masculinity and deriving pleasures both erotic and otherwise from doing so, drag kings may also play at being the subject of such discourses. By momentarily (de)constructing heterosexuality, masculinity and femininity as their abjected ‘other’, drag kings are perversely empowered to position themselves in direct contrast to the female masculine woman as perverse ‘other’. Although such discourses may have the power to set up the terms within which drag kinging and female masculinity might be viewed or represented, or even experienced as resistance in relation to those discourses, deliberately and purposefully perverting them through ‘queering’ them becomes the means by which drag kings can and do prioritise their own desires and identifications with female masculinity in the name of personal pleasure. Nevertheless, in queering such discourses, drag kings are also fully aware of the power those discourses continue to have and wield over gendered and sexual identification and desire, including their own, which perhaps motivates the queering of them, whilst also,
paradoxically, providing them with identificatory avenues to express their female masculinity. However, there still remains the assertion that the double relationship of ‘subject/object’ which is simultaneously played out in drag kinging continues to structure many of the erotic and other pleasures inherent to kinging, and also perversely employs and subverts ‘the habitual relation between dominant and other’ (4).

The ‘perverse dynamic(s)’ that informs both the meaningfulness of drag kinging and the various pleasures arising from performing in drag, are the product of a ‘transgressive agency inseparable from a dynamic intrinsic to social process’ (Dollimore 1991, 33). In a nutshell, heterosexual (read dominant) constructions of ‘improper’ and ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity, and drag king constructions of female masculinity, ‘share a relation of interdependence in which subject and object (respectively) form an exclusive and inevitable relationship by which you can’t have one without the other’ (Whatling 1997, 4). Any ‘transgression’ of that relationship by drag kings – as perverse appropriation and subversion of it – is enabled rather than hindered by this ‘relation of interdependence’, and, I would argue, by the queer knowledge that the epistemological frames that govern and stabilise heterosexual and ‘bourgeois’ notions of identity are nothing other than an illusion or delusion, albeit a powerful illusion that continues to serve not only the idea of the stable, autonomous (heterosexual) self, but also any perversion of it. The dialectic of ‘self/other’ oppositions, and the subsequent perverse subject/object relationships that are played out between drag kings – and drag king bodies, audiences and masculine-identified women – with dominant constructions of sexuality and ‘proper’ gender identities, are the very relationships that serve to create and enhance a disobedience they are meant to prevent or, ironically, seek to render impossible. More specifically, when drag kings pervert and reverse the dominant subject/object relationship through their bodily and pleasurable engagement with their own ideas of, or identifications with masculinity, they promote and celebrate their (apparently oxymoronic) female masculinity as a re-inscription of that masculinity from within the repressive relationship of ‘dominant and other’.

In this context, doing and engaging with female masculinity through performance and spectator appreciation, and deriving erotic, bodily and other pleasures from doing so, means simultaneously identifying and associating with the oxymoronic or ‘other/ed’ masculine-female, but refusing to have those erotic, bodily and other pleasures
restricted, defined within, or determined by that relationship. This complex relationship emerges from a dynamic whereby ‘dissidence’, and in the case of drag kings that dissidence emerges through the existence, glorification and honouring of female embodied masculinity, is not only ‘repressed by the dominant (coercively and ideologically), but in a sense actually produced by it’ (Dollimore 1991, 26).

Paradoxically, this not only suggests that transgression or dissidence necessarily presupposes the laws of the dominant, but it also serves to consolidate both the ‘repressed/dominant’ relationship and the dominant structures that govern that relationship. (85). However, if dissidence (or transgression) necessitates presupposing those laws it does not mean that dissidence necessarily endorses them, or is entirely determined by them. In fact, it may well be that those laws motivate many of drag kinging’s dynamics. Whilst this highlights drag kinging’s (perverse) dependence on those relationships, it also demonstrates the queer agent’s ability to highlight and perversely take pleasure from exploiting the many contradictions and instabilities within those relationships, which exist, more often than not, by virtue of what they simultaneously contain and exclude (33). The drag king – the masculine woman, the woman as masculine – ‘seizes upon’ and takes advantage of those contradictions and instabilities, inspiring not only recognition of those existing relationships as not inevitable – as contingent and not timeless – but also that the freedom to embody, celebrate, eroticise and desire female masculinity is only achieved – albeit conditionally and contextually – through transformation of the laws that would seek to govern, control and contain the same (89).
Jonathan Dollimore suggestively remarks that the act of containing a ‘threat’ requires giving that threat a visibility and identity, and is in fact the very activity that produces it (Dollimore 1991, 84). This observation is perhaps inspired by Foucault who maintained that power primarily functions by producing, inciting, dispersing and intensifying anything it imagines to be a threat, particularly desires considered perverse (225). Foucault envisaged a dialectic between power and pleasure whereby ‘power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered’ (Foucault 1980, 45). Power, he argued, does not control desire or sexuality through prohibition, law, or taboo, but rather, works primarily through naming unorthodox desires and sexualities. Whilst not denying that prohibition exists as an aspect of power, Foucault maintained that power was (and remains) inherently productive rather than prohibitive. In addition, he maintained that where there is power there is also resistance. Resistance exists all the more for being in the same place as power, and in this sense highlights the fragility and vulnerability of power structures to inversion and displacement. That resistance is always inside power means power and resistance are mutually engaged in a perverse dynamic – a dynamic borne out by the following arguments and their subsequent influence on the dynamics at play in drag kinging.

In the context of the above argument on containment, we might regard female masculinity – traditionally named as ‘improper’, perverse, or failed femininity – together with the pleasures of embodying and desiring that female masculinity, as not only a threat to the laws and heteronormative constructions that seek to govern female subjectivity and desire, but also the constitution of ‘proper’ or ‘real’ masculinity, and by default, heterosexuality. Dollimore’s version of the containment argument derives from his critique of past and current containment theories, which ‘have always recognised that identity is an effect of the social domains which subversion and transgression would contest’ (82). Broadly speaking those theories vary from the anthropological and the psychological, to the inversion of binaries, and Michel Foucault’s persuasive theories on sexuality. Respectively, they include the suggestion that transgressive practices such as carnival are merely licensed releases of ‘social tension’ that conserve and guarantee the existing social order, rather than undermine it; that transgression is ‘a
defiance based on dependence … the transgressor disobeys but authority relates the terms’; thirdly, that to ‘invert a binary opposition … is to remain within rather than overthrow its oppressive structure’ (82). And finally, in relation to Foucault’s theories, is the idea that sexuality, far from being either ‘anarchic and hence potentially subversive’ and in need of control or liberation from control, should actually be viewed ‘in terms of socially created identities and desires which enable rather than hinder the operations of power within the realm of the psychosexual’ (83). More specifically, sexuality is not something which authority or ‘power’ is afraid of, but ‘is actually a discursive construct which power works through’ (83). The complexities and realities of containment theories are such that I will only selectively quote from Dollimore’s more in-depth critique to arrive at its relevance in examining dragking and female masculinity as, indeed, potentially subversive and transgressive of heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality, and more specifically female/feminine subjectivity and desire (Dollimore 1991, 81-91).

Containment theories, writes Dollimore, are primarily interpreted by their critics as ‘saying that resistance is only ever an effect of power’; that is, power is ‘all pervasive’ and resistance, wherever it exists, is ultimately self-deceiving (84). But as Dollimore provocatively claims, if resistance is only ‘ever the ruse of the power which created it’, and at the same time is manufactured as a threat that must be suppressed by the power that ‘produced it’, then in the very act of producing that threat power gives it both an identity and visibility, which ‘may then or subsequently be occupied or appropriated by oppositional forces’ (84). However, it is also too optimistic to suggest that the implication of this critique of power’s supposed omnipotence means that resistance is never going to be impossible (84). As Dollimore notes, although resistance may be possible, the ‘fact of possibility says little about the likelihood of success’ (85). Rather, he takes a more pragmatic theoretical view by suggesting that, ‘just as containment theorists should not judge a priori that all subversion is contained, so its opponents cannot decide a priori that all power structures are subvertible’ (85).

In reality, any act of subversion would have to be positioned historically and contextually before it could be regarded as such, not to mention the problematic of deciding whether any subversion could actually be considered subversive or transgressive, and, in any event, who would be the judge of that? Again this would be
dependant on context and history. He goes further to suggest that rather than get tied up within containment theories that judge subversion or transgression’s success within the ‘impossible criteria’ of ‘complete transformation of the social … (as) total personal liberation’, it may be more constructive to think in terms of containment as ‘in principle’ always vulnerable to subversion and transgression by the ‘selfsame challenge it has either incorporated, imagined, or actually produced (via containment)’ (85). Mary Russo’s examination of ‘carnival’ as both undermining and reinforcing existing social structures, parallels this argument. The carnivalesque, as a sanctioned form of inversion, works multivalently. By functioning as a liminal, or ‘topsy-turvy’ mode of behaviour, it is said carnival works to redefine social boundaries, rather than disrupt them (Russo 1995, 58). However, whilst sanctioning carnivalesque behaviour might be thought to ultimately keep men and women ‘in their place’, it is also the case that offering such options widens their behavioural choices, and provides for levels of disobedience never intended. Further, carnival and the carnivalesque, as ostensibly contained, are clearly not oppositional or simply reactive. In fact, both refuse to ‘surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class’ (62). Carnival can be seen as ‘a site of insurgency’, releasing in all manner of recombinations, inversions, mockeries and degradations, those rules, distinctions, and boundaries of culture, society, knowledge, and desire that seek to contain and organise us (62). The point here is not that carnival seeks autonomy over and above dominant culture, but that it contains the protocols of dominant culture (62). Carnival resists, through exaggeration and destabilisation, the very protocols that mark and maintain culture and organised society (62).

It is not fair then to claim that transgression or subversion must be judged in terms of ultimate freedom, or as some form of utopian escape from ‘power’. The failure of any transgression is guaranteed under these conditions when one considers that ‘the agency involved in both subversion and transgression is usually assumed to be a local or limited one, and often explicitly subjective or voluntarist’ (Dollimore 1991, 85). And when transgression is theorised as true independence and ultimate autonomy from that which is being resisted, any transgression that fails to achieve this idealistic view is often seen as merely ‘a rebellion not against authority but within it’ (82). In effect, when transgression is idealised within terms of creating a world of one’s own in which personal autonomy and freedom from repression are its criteria, then any practice of transgression is bound to be judged a failure when you consider that the ‘transgressor(s)
typically emerges from a position of marginality, subordination, and repression’, that is, ‘relative powerlessness’ (85).

Dollimore is quick to point out the unwillingness of some containment theorists to concede that ‘any particular episode of containment may be a stage in a larger process of change’ in which the apparent personal ‘failure’ of the transgressor ‘becomes a stage in a longer term success’ (for instance, one could think here of feminism’s progress and success over time) (85). More importantly, he argues that the containment theorist ‘overlooks the part played by contradiction and dislocation in the mutually reactive process of transgression and its control’ (86). Typically, dominant social constructions attempt to ‘fix’ themselves by naturalising their forms and ‘putting them beyond question’, but do so by effacing and containing the contradictions and conflicts that form a part of those constructions – especially any contestation of them. Inherent in this process then, is the reality that contradictions, conflicts and contestation are in fact potentially destabilising of dominant social constructions, since they must first be effaced and then contained (86). Further, in highlighting the contingent nature of social constructions and their potential instability – the potential that those constructions could be otherwise, that contestation may come from without and within – Dollimore also rightly notes that one should not underestimate the powerful investments made in those social constructions and the difficulty of altering them (87). With that said though, he suggestively deduces that the ‘inner logic’ of the social processes responsible for social constructions – for example those of gender and sexuality – simultaneously and subsequently help effect their negation, or at the very least challenge their rationale.

For instance, he gives the example of how censorship may ultimately become the agent for that which it seeks to repress or censor. He writes: ‘Mass communication provides a commonplace example in the censorship which becomes, via the controversy it provokes, the publicist for what it seeks to repress’ (87). In a similar move, drag kinning and female masculinity are effectively validated rather than repressed by those laws and constructions that would render such gendered display and its eroticisation as culturally inconceivable and impossible. What should be becoming clear, in light of preceding chapters, is that drag king performances and embodiments of female masculinity selectively and astutely employ those laws and dominant constructions of gender and sexuality that would seek to repress or contain them. This is not necessarily to
revolutionise such laws and constructions, but to contest, subvert and rearticulate them within a queer female economy of desire. Such ‘Camp’ strategies aim to serve those desires first and foremost, but they also highlight the many contradictions that are inherent to those laws and constructions, and how such laws and constructions ultimately become both the agent of their own undoing, and the ‘publicist’ for what they seek to repress and render culturally unthinkable. In relation to the laws that govern gender and sexuality, and the social constructions that legitimise them, these particular dynamics and strategies of drag kinging demonstrate that,

no matter how successful authority may be in its repressive strategies, there remains something potentially uncontrollable not only in authority’s objects but in its enterprise, its rationale, and even its origin. In short, change, contest, and struggle are in part made possible by contradiction (88)

Expanding and extending upon the role of contradictions as both destabilising social constructions whilst being responsible for strategies of containment, and with particular reference to dominant social constructions of gender and sexuality, Dollimore reminds us how embedded in containment is the unacknowledged knowledge – the conscious exclusion – of the contradictions by which dominant constructions on gender and sexuality (re)constitute themselves (89). Dollimore writes:

An instance of this is the way binarism, that most static of structures, produces internal instabilities in and through the very categories it deploys in order to clarify, divide, and stabilize the world. Thus the us/them opposition produces the anomaly of the internal dissident (87).

By deploying categories that seek to name, divide, and stabilise, dominant constructions of gender and sexuality actually make themselves susceptible to subversion through their need to maintain and (re)constitute categories and divisions, thereby revealing the inherent but excluded threat of the ‘internal dissident’ and the need to contain them. Paradoxically then, containment becomes susceptible to subversion in and through its own logic. As Dollimore again suggestively notes ‘binarism affords the opportunity for transgression in and of its own terms; transgression is in part enabled by the very logic which would prevent it’ (88).
As has been and will be promoted throughout this thesis, many of drag kinging’s multiple meanings and effects initially originate within and perversely exploit the contradictions that destabilise heteronormative laws on gender and sexuality – particularly the laws that seek to govern female/feminine subjectivity and desire. In addition, the literal acting out of and perverse pleasures taken from those contradictions, through the public performance, celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity, illustrate that the ‘surfacing of contradictions is enabled by and contributes to transgressive or dissident knowledge’ (88). Again, this is reminiscent of Russo’s examination of the carnivalesque’s role as both a stabilising and destabilising force on culture and society. Whilst carnivalesque spectacle begins ‘in and from a position of debasement’, it also transgresses its limitations within culture and society by both conspicuously employing and ridiculing that which seeks to contain it (Russo 1995, 62).

If female masculinity is at all transgressive – if it in any way subverts the laws that seek to govern gender and sexuality – it is more likely to be ‘in terms of the dangerous knowledge it brings with it, or produces, or which is produced in and by its containment’ within those laws (Dollimore 1991, 88-9). And the continuing repression of female masculinity (of any gendered identity deemed transgressive), emerges not because it is ‘only ever contained’ – a strategy those laws employ to consolidate themselves – but because it really does challenge and subvert those heteronormative laws on gender, sexuality and female desire (89).

However, it is also wise to remember that such laws ‘can and do reconstitute themselves around the selfsame contradictions that destabilize them’ (89). Any transgression – in this context the embodiment and eroticisation of female masculinity – which may be deemed a ‘threat’ to the consolidation of heteronormative laws on gender and sexuality, has the potential to produce a dialectic between those laws and any resistance to them, whereby any threat or destabilisation ‘becomes a force of repression much more than a force of liberation’ (89). As Dollimore reminds us, an example of this is the continuing dialectic of ‘the displacement of social crisis, generated within and by the dominant, onto the subordinate’ (89). The subordinate – as deviant - is ‘demonized’ in and through displacement, and there are, argues Dollimore, ‘three ways whereby the dominant identifies the subordinate (or the deviant) as threatening ‘other’ (89). Without going into a detailed analysis of them, those three ways might include paranoia: ‘the threat is imagined only’; subversion: ‘the threat is actually or potentially dangerous’,
and thirdly, ‘the displacement of crisis and anxiety etc. onto the deviant’ (89). Although it must be remembered that any ‘deviance’ usually provokes a negative reaction and actions (for example, displacement and violence respectively, against it), it must also be remembered that the ‘process of displacement/demonizing can never be assured of success, because it is usually a consequence of some kind of instability in the dominant’ (90). However, as Dollimore also notes, ‘what stacks the odds in favour of displacement succeeding is the brute fact of the minority’s relative powerlessness and probable disrepute’ (90).

Whilst this all sounds particularly disempowering for those who seek to challenge dominant or heteronormative laws on gender and sexuality, it doesn’t preclude them from continuing dissent or contestation. In the case of drag kings and the promotion of female masculinity, it is the very act of both radically and perversely employing and contesting dominant laws on female/feminine subjectivity and desire, together with the knowledge that those laws need to ‘contain’ the threat of that contestation, which not only sparks the motivation to establish and authorise, within the context of drag king culture, the meanings and value of female masculinity, but also many of its other dynamics. The reality is if female masculinity were not in some way disruptive of, or subversive of dominant laws on female/feminine subjectivity and desire, there would be no need to contain or repress it, no need to displace it through demonising it and rendering it culturally unviable, and certainly no need to consider it threatening. If female masculinity was not potentially threatening in some way, there would also be no need for it to only be celebrated within the ‘safe’ and accepting context of drag king culture; but then, if it was not considered dangerous or illicit in some way, it could not be embodied and interpreted in the ways that currently make it so powerful, erotic and ‘charged’. Those dynamics exist by virtue of what they perversely acknowledge, transgress and reinscribe. In particular, the celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity exists as both an effect and contestation of what heteronormative laws have variously constructed as culturally unthinkable, as culturally impossible, and as the ‘failed’ woman.
3.1 The finest woman or the prettiest fellow?\footnote{Sub-heading inspired by James Quinn’s quote of 1766: ‘It was a most nice point to decide between the gentlemen and ladies, whether she was the finest woman, or the prettiest fellow’. Kristina Straub, “The Guilty Pleasures of Theatrical Cross-dressing” in Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 425.}

A man in a woman is different from a man [in a man]: the layering transgresses and extends both.

- Judith Roof, \textit{The Lure of Knowledge} (246).

To masquerade as a man, and to do it well, is to enter a no-woman’s-land ‘beyond’ femininity.


Within drag king culture, female masculinity, as it is performed and made legible on the female drag king body, is re-signified as desirable and powerful, rather than signalling an abject or failed figure of womanhood. In addition, when performances of female masculinity are celebrated, eroticised and rendered legible via the sociocultural and sociosexual contexts that both drag king culture \textit{and} the lesbian female body provide, female masculinity perversely and ‘queerly’ contests symbolic laws and heteronormative constructions of femininity and female sexuality. Through enacting, embodying, and taking anarchic pleasure from sexed positions that those laws and constructions paradoxically institute, only to perpetually restrict, prohibit or render impossible, drag kings queerly and perversely \textit{re-institute} the possibility of pleasurably identifying with those very same sexed positions that have been foreclosed or excluded.

For instance, symbolic and heteronormative laws continue to construct female masculinity as inverted heterosexual femininity; the masculine woman is not ‘properly’ sexed, and by constructing and naming her as such, she becomes both an organising but excluded and abject figure of those laws, and a failure and a threat that must be contained. In support of Dollimore’s analysis of the contradictory ‘logic’ and mechanisms that structure gender and sexuality, I employ various points from Judith Butler’s critique of the Lacanian symbolic, together with her post-Lacanian theories on gender and sexed positions, to highlight the constraining forces present in heterosexual constructions of the same. And with particular reference to female/feminine subjectivity and desire, I note the abiding need of the symbolic to maintain those constructions through its various prohibitions and taboos. Paradoxically, what becomes apparent
from this is the symbolic’s vulnerability to the reinscribing or ‘reworking’ of its own prohibitions and taboos. The symbolic effectively creates the possibility for reformulations of its laws within its own terms, and the constraints that are said to propel both identification with and repudiation of various sexed positions, effectively create the possibility for a rebellion against them. In a very Camp move, drag kings signal the erotic and pleasurable possibilities of identifying with sexed positions that conventionally signal abjection and failure, or punishment for not being properly sexed. By detailing prohibited sexed positions and practices, symbolic and heteronormative laws and constructions effectively bring them into a ‘public, discursive domain’, which works to produce them as potentially ‘erotic enterprises’ and identificatory zones, rather than as threats or punishments (Butler 1993, 110). As Judith Butler reminds us, it is only a heterosexual presumption that assumes that ‘apparently inverted identifications will effectively and exclusively signal abjection rather than pleasure’, and ‘signal abjection without at once signalling the possibility of a pleasurable insurrection against the law or an erotic turning of the law against itself’ (110).

I suggest that many of the erotic dynamics of drag king culture, along with many of the other pleasures taken from drag kinging’s performances of female masculinity, may originate in, derive their impact from, and take their meaning from a type of insurrection – in the doing or enacting of that insurrection. Here, the prohibitions and taboos of symbolic and heteronormative laws on gender and sexuality both regulate and become the very site of other ‘phantasmatic’ identifications (97). Paradoxically, those laws purposely construct such identifications only to reject and repudiate them in the name of ‘proper’ heterosexual and gendered identification. However, in drag king culture those laws are reformulated and the embodiment of female masculinity becomes a sexed position to be celebrated and eroticised. Those laws then, effectively become eroticised precisely because of the transgressive possibilities – the ‘threats’ – they produce. It is through the symbolic’s own ‘constitutive instability’ that drag kings reformulate and perversely take pleasure from female masculinity – an otherwise abject

19 Butler employs the notion of ‘phantasmatic’ identifications to signify the ‘identificatory locations of the subject’ as ‘labile’ or subject to change, and that the term ‘fantasy’ is retained for ‘those active imaginings which presuppose a relative locatedness of the subject in relation to regulatory schemes’ (1993:265 endnote 2). Recalling Laplanche and Pontalis’s use of the term phantasmatic in Formations of Fantasy (London: Methuen, 1986), Butler suggests ‘fantasy in this (phantasmatic) sense is to be understood not as an activity of an already formed subject, but of the staging and dispersion of the subject into a variety of identificatory positions’. Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 267.
In her chapter, ‘Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex’ (Butler 1993, 93-119), Judith Butler explores the performative nature of gender and sexed positions, but argues against those constructionist theories that suggest that these positions are performed in an unconstrained or voluntaristic way. Such theories, she argues, fail to incorporate and describe the complexities of what constitutes the conditions under which a subject assumes a gendered or sexed position. She proposes that such theories need to ‘take account of the domain of constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way’ (94). The performative dimension of constructionist accounts is ‘precisely the forced reiteration of norms’, and those norms, she argues, are constrained by the very conditions of their own constitutiveness. In effect, Butler is suggesting that constraint is the very condition of performativity, and that which both impels and sustains it, but does not necessarily limit it. Such constraints, she suggests, revolve around what is difficult to imagine and what remains unthinkable. They might include ‘the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise … the absence of certain desires’ and ‘the abiding repudiation of some sexual possibilities’ (94). These constraints form part (but not all of) of the constitutive demands on sexed positions (and sexuality) that are located in the realm of the Lacanian symbolic, and as such are considered to be the ‘limits of what can and cannot be constructed’ (96). However, because such constraints are produced through the force of prohibitions and taboos, Butler rightly asks ‘what sexual (im)possibilities have served as the constitutive constraints of sexed positionality, and what possibilities of reworking those constraints arise from within its own terms’? (96).

Because the symbolic assumes that the assumption of masculine and feminine sexed positions is compelled by fear of castration and fear of not being castrated respectively, Lacanian theories of the symbolic presume that fear of occupying either of these positions ‘is what compels the assumption of a sexed position within language, a sexed position that is sexed by virtue of its heterosexual positioning’ (96). Further, ‘implicit in the figure of castration, which operates differentially to constitute the constraining force of gendered punishment, are at least two inarticulate figures of abject homosexuality, the feminized fag and the phallicized dyke’ (96). In effect, Butler suggests that sexed
positions – sexed through being marked by and positioned within only heterosexual possibilities, and constructed through the constitutive constraints of the symbolic – are ‘assumed through a move that excludes and abjects gay and lesbian possibilities’ (96). She concludes that if a sexed position is assumed through identifying with those positions dictated by and ‘marked out’ by the symbolic domain, and if that identification ‘involves fantasising the possibility of approximating that symbolic site’, then the ‘heterosexist constraint that compels the assumption of sex operates through the regulation of phantasmatic identification’ (97). In addition to relying on the power of its threats, the symbolic also relies ‘on resistance to identification with masculine feminization and feminine phallicization’, revealing itself as having to establish and maintain its laws through a dependence on certain constraints and the exclusion and abjection of certain sexed positions (97). However, and with particular reference to the promotion and celebration of female masculinity in drag king culture, it is the very law that deploys the abject phallicised dyke as a threat, which ‘becomes itself an inadvertent site of eroticisation’ (97).

Butler discusses how the symbolic ‘marks a body as feminine through the mark of privation and castration’ (102). According to the symbolic’s logic women are already punished, already castrated, and any relation to the phallus will always be penis envy. In effect, the feminine position is produced as castrated, as ‘lack’, only in relation to the masculine position of ‘having’ the phallus, but the feminine position also symbolises the punishment that threatens this ‘having’ (102). Paradoxically, the feminine position is both one of ‘lack’, read as incompleteness, and that which threatens to ‘de-phallicise’ the masculine position through what that lack signifies – castration. This suggests that this ‘having’ of the phallus is dependent for its ‘erection’ on the prop of the feminine position, and yet is always under constant threat of impotence – of de-masculinisation – by the spectre of becoming the feminine position that enables it. This clearly demonstrates how this ‘having’ of the phallus is an inherently vulnerable affair: a ‘having’ that is both reliant on its reflection against, and its deflection from, a ‘properly’ constituted feminine position, a ‘having’ that is ultimately not there – has never really been there.

Butler reminds us again how both the feminine and masculine are marked by the symbolic through threatening that body with some form of privation or castration. But
because women are said to already be castrated, the threat of castration ultimately only applies to the male body – a body that is marked by fear first, and then with the symbolic stamp of sex (101). This would suggest that the having of the phallus is also constituted through a type of penis envy, because it presupposes that the masculine position must first fear castration – must fear becoming the feminine figure of castration, before it might approximate the ‘proper’ masculine position of ‘having’ the phallus (101). And as Butler so eloquently suggests, ‘castration could not be feared if the phallus were not already detachable, already elsewhere, already dispossessed’ (101).

What this also suggests is that anyone might aspire to this ‘having’ of the phallus, since ‘having’ it can only ever be ‘phantasmatically’ assumed, can only ever be an ‘imaginary identification’ (104). What Butler critically deduces is that if symbolic law must – is forced to – compel through threats, both feminine and masculine identification, then ‘it appears that this law ‘knows’ that identification could function differently’ (104). For instance, Butler has extensively deconstructed and described how the properly constituted feminine position marked out by the symbolic is only ever a demand in the guise of a threat. Further, the functioning of symbolic law, which insists on and persists through ideologies of circumscription and reiteration, recognises that within that threat lies not only the threatening possibility that woman will fail to repeat, but that she might fail to feel threatened by that which is her punishment.

Symbolic law demands that woman must, is compelled to, identify with a ‘position of castration’: must renounce any effort to approximate a ‘having’ of the phallus, must renounce any identification with masculinization, and must assume the mark of castration or be ‘punished’ with homosexuality and the ‘monstrous ascent into phallicism’ (103). What such constraints fail to suggest but almost certainly recognise is the possibility she could identify otherwise, and in this sense, ‘there is always some critical distance between what the law compels and the identification that the feminine body offers up’ (104):

For if she must assume, accomplish, accede to her castration, there is at the start some failure of socialization here, some excessive occurrence of that body outside and beyond its mark, in relation to that mark…. Indeed, there is a body which has failed to perform its castration in accord with the symbolic laws, some focus of resistance, some way in which the desire to have the phallus has not been renounced and continues to persist (104).
Although Butler’s analysis could invite the accusation of ‘penis envy’, she also demonstrates the ‘unstable status of identification’, and that inherent to ‘the very structure of envy’ (in this case) is the possibility of an ‘imaginary identification, a crossing over into a ‘having’ of the phallus that is both acknowledged and blocked’ (104 my emphasis). This analysis of feminine identification highlights how ‘the body marked as feminine occupies or inhabits its mark at a critical distance’ (104). Further, it also highlights how the law knows that any ‘feminine effort to identify with ‘having’ the phallus’ could resist its demands not to, because it insists that this possibility be renounced (105). What Butler’s arguments demonstrate, besides the misogynistic construction of female phallicism as ‘monstrous’, is that any identification or alignment with the phallus is only ever a ‘phantasmatic effort’ and therefore, always a type of penis envy, because any identification with the phallus can never be entirely made (105). In this context, anyone might imagine, identify with, or aspire to ‘having’ the phallus.

The very structure of symbolic law demands that both masculine and feminine identification must be repeatedly (re)produced, reiterated, and forever (re)consolidated. Therefore, identification is an ongoing and ceaseless exercise always subject to and compelled by the possibility of failure, prohibition and punishment. As a product and result of ‘phantasmatic approximation’ (104), repetition, or repetitive acts of announcement, identification can always go awry; it is inadvertently (or advertently?) constructed and revealed to be an inherently risky and anxiety riddled affair. What Butler’s analysis reveals are the ‘loopholes’ in the law with regards to its demands to identify ‘properly’. Effectively, Butler further critiques and defines the symbolic’s laws on identification within the terms outlined below and highlights its inadequacies. It is worth quoting her in order to understand both the complexity and subtlety of her argument before we move on to the relevance of her theories to drag kinging and female masculinity.

Identification is constantly figured as a desired event or accomplishment…. In this sense, identifications belong to the imaginary…. Identifications are never fully made; they are incessantly reconstituted …. Understood as a phantasmatic effort subject to the logic of iterability, identification always takes place in relation to a law, or, more specifically, a prohibition that works through delivering a threat of punishment (105).
The symbolic, through its own logic, reveals its laws as nothing other than demands and threats, compelling proper sexuality and gendered identification through various means and hierarchical structuring principles. Even more compellingly, Butler suggests that if a person ‘fails’ to properly identify with the symbolic position marked out for them, then ‘failure’ would constitute ‘the site of resistance to the law’ (105). Could the Camp manoeuvres that drag kings and their audiences practice and participate in to celebrate female masculinity, be likened to a perverse and pleasurable ‘failure’, which simultaneously provides or provokes the opportunity for resistance?

In symbolic law, female masculinity, constructed and understood as both a failed figure of womanhood and that ‘failed’ woman’s punishment, is produced through structures of differentiation, exclusion and abjection, and thus is revealed as and remains a spectral figure that, paradoxically, structures and contests that self-same law. In addition, because eroticisation and celebration of female masculinity in drag king culture constitutes a type of resistance to the law, even though that law would only produce that resistance as a type of ‘failure’, it highlights how the law makes itself available for reworking or refiguring ‘by virtue of the kind of resistances that it generates’ (105). As a consequence of invoking demands and threats to structure symbolic laws, those laws also expose their inherent vulnerability and subjection to destabilisation through subversion via resistance and resignification. Further, if identification must be instilled and produced through commands, demands, fear and the ‘logic of iterability’, and Butler has highlighted how this is the case, then she is correct when she writes that any failure to comply with the symbolic’s identificatory phantasms constitutes a site of resistance. I would argue then, that drag king culture and female masculinity’s ‘failure’ to properly identify with the laws of ‘proper’ feminine identification, its refusal to feel ‘punished’ by that failure, and its eroticisation of female phallicism, constitutes a perverse resistance to those laws.

Butler might conclude that the Camp identificatory acts, desires, and practices that drag kings and their fans participate in may help to question the authority of laws, which must employ compulsion in an effort to force strict compliance with the sexed positions and gendered identifications they mark out and construct, but they may not ultimately contest the dynamics by which those laws reiterate their power, and therefore cannot ‘alter the structural sexism and homophobia of its sexual demands’ (106). Whilst this
might indicate that the political efficacy of drag kinging and drag king culture to alter or contest the legislative symbolic and heteronormative dynamics that direct sexed positions is ‘weak’, it does inadvertently acknowledge that the *processes* of the symbolic – the laws that regulate sexed positions – are available for subversion and resignification. Since symbolic and heteronormative laws of (gendered and sexual) identification are elaborated and persist through positions and practices that must be reiterated or renounced, creating, by logical association, what must be repudiated and prohibited, then in the process of articulating and elaborating on these, those laws effectively provide ‘the discursive occasion for a resistance, a resignification, and potential self-subversion’ of those laws (109). This echoes Dollimore’s argument that what underlies the construction and maintenance of social structures is the effacement and containment of the contradictions or contestations that inform those structures. The inner logic and rationale of the social processes that constitute those constructions, for instance those of gender and sexuality, simultaneously effect their vulnerability to transgression. Not only that, they also unwittingly become the agent for that which they seek to repress. And paraphrasing Foucault, Butler parallels Dollimore’s analysis of censorship and its ultimate role as the publicist for that which it seeks to repress. She writes how ‘the process of signification that governs juridical laws’ exceeds their ‘putative ends’: (h)ence, a prohibitive law, by underscoring a given practice, produces the occasion for a public contest that may inadvertently enable, refigure, and proliferate the very social phenomenon it seeks to restrict (109).

In the case of the symbolic’s prohibitive sanctions and taboos on female sexuality and sexed positions, such prohibitive sanctions effectively create the possibility for their eroticisation. What hopefully is becoming clear, is that it is those prohibitions that, paradoxically – that ‘queerly’ (pun intended) – run the risk of eroticising the very abject identifications and practices they prohibit. As suggested previously, by detailing prohibited practices, those laws bring ‘such practices into a public, discursive domain’, and in doing so, produce them as ‘potential erotic enterprises’ (110). Further, prohibitions ‘can themselves become objects of eroticisation’, such that being positioned within and coming under the ‘censure’ of ‘the law’, becomes the very condition that inspires the eroticisation of certain prohibitions (110). In line with previous discussions, which suggested that the contradictory logic and mechanisms that structure gender and sexuality allow for and inform perversion of them, I continue to
propose that much of the erotics and pleasures of both embodying and celebrating female masculinity can be located within and demonstrated through the laws of the symbolic, but a symbolic that is perversely employed and radically reformulated within the very terms of its own constraints and taboos.

For instance, the structures and conditions that would interpellate drag kings and masculine-identified women as abject and failed women paradoxically provide them with a certain agency, in that they can mobilise those structures and conditions against their ‘originating aims’ (123). Where the command for behavioural conformity to feminine subjectivity means a refusal of female phallicism, ‘there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting’ of female phallicism, or the repetition of the law – the abject or ‘failed’ woman – the phallic dyke – into ‘hyperbole’, which ‘subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command[s], and provides the occasion for a slippage between command and ‘appropriated effect’ (122). As the product of inherently Camp manoeuvres, the performances, pleasures and erotics of drag kinging and female masculinity’s phantasmatic identifications, do not evolve, or pretend to exist, through outright resistance or opposition to symbolic and heteronormative laws on feminine identification. Those pleasures, erotics, and identifications are the result of the constitutive instability of those laws, and of queerly deconstructing and perversely employing the processes and ideologies that create and authorise feminine identification and subjectivity. Drag kings and their audiences take perverse pleasure in occupying, embodying and celebrating what symbolic and heteronormative laws continue to construct as abject and as ‘failed’ womanhood. Within the context of drag king culture, the phallic dyke, the masculine woman, becomes a figure of positive female power, desire and eroticism. The masculine woman is refigured and re-identified.

### 3.1.1 Accommodating Female Masculinity in the Camp.

If we consider Butler’s theory that identificatory ‘phantasies’ may be just that – illusions, fantasies, and constitutive ‘spectres’ (Butler 1993, 116) – which inform ‘proper’ masculine and feminine identification, sexuality and morphology respectively, then we might deduce that such ‘phantasies’ also elicit the possibility of cross-
identifications that question the stability of those identifications and morphologies, and compulsory heterosexuality. Because identificatory processes involve phantasmatic identification they always and also invite the risk of transgressive identifications, because, as Butler argues, such phantasmatic identifications are always already imaginary and there is no ‘real’ that one can be measured against (91). Because there is only ever the ‘domain of the imaginary’ (although Butler does concede that it remains a hegemonic one, constituted as it is through the ‘naturalisation of an exclusionary heterosexual’ logic and morphology), it means that identification can never be ‘strictly regulated’ (90-1). In effect, the symbolic’s (heterosexist) laws on identification and sexual difference remain the hegemonic ‘imaginary schema’ (91) we are compelled to live by and identify through. Yet it is precisely because identification and sexual difference are inherently ‘phantasmatically’ constituted events and processes, which are also ‘historically contingent’ (91), that we can begin to see how drag kings may ‘work the weaknesses’ into them in order to elicit and derive their own perverse pleasures from female masculinity.

In this sense, identification with female masculinity and the erotics and desires that motivate it, is as imaginary an identification as any; yet it cannot be ‘measured against a real one’, where ‘real’ is only a hegemonic imaginary constituted through the naturalisation of an exclusionary heterosexual logic. Identification with female masculinity simply advances an ‘alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary’ (91), while at the same time remaining the excluded and foreclosed that institutes the ‘proper’ feminine subject (116). However, as an ‘exclusion’ that ‘must be refused’ – must ‘remain as refuse, as abjected’ – female masculinity persists ‘as the permanent or constitutive spectre’ of the feminine subject’s own destabilisation (116).

The inherent instability of symbolic and heteronormative laws then, provokes many of the (queer) pleasures and erotics of drag kinging and female masculinity. Further, that instability provides the means by which they can be experienced as such. It is not in a denial or refusal of the symbolic’s laws on sexed positions that such eroticism and pleasures are to be found, for to refuse to identify with any given position is to paradoxically affirm it through disavowal. Disavowal, argues Butler, can only take place through identification with that which is being disavowed – through a ‘logic of repudiation’ (112). This is blatantly highlighted in the heterosexist and heteronormative
imperative to construct gendered and sexed positions within notions of what is and must stay ‘proper’. Butler argues that this occurs through ‘the production, exclusion and repudiation’ of the ‘abjected spectres’ that threaten those very subject positions – that is, what is ‘improper’ (113). Effectively, identification operates here at the expense of another identification. In addition, the ‘binary figuration’ of feminised masculinity and masculinized femininity as organising figures of the Lacanian symbolic, are not only produced as the ‘threatening outside’ that safeguards the symbolic’s ‘continuing hegemony’, but also constitute ‘the defining limits of symbolic exchange’, and thus foreclose the possibility of cross-identificatory and desiring positions (104).

In drag kinging however, female fantasies of, identification with, and desires for masculinity are inherently incoherent in respect to symbolic demands to identify through repudiation and abjection. When women perform and watch drag, when they eroticise and take pleasure from various female masculinities and ‘sexed’ positions, they aren’t necessarily disavowing a constitutive relationship with symbolic demands to identify through repudiation and abjection, but are engaged in an ‘interrelationship’ that makes ‘contestatory connections’ with the symbolic (115). The very point of drag kinging and its celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity is to both embody and promote the ‘kind of complex crossings of identification and desire’ that might exceed and contest the binary frames that govern laws on gender and sexuality, particularly those that govern femininity and female sexuality and desire (103). Further, I would also suggest that such identifications and desires automatically call into question the compulsory heterosexuality ascribed to the symbolic simply through the fact that those identifications and desires, whilst interpreted and made meaningful through negotiation with and against the symbolic’s demands, are an occasion to demonstrate those demands as merely privileged rather than pre-ordained or ‘precultural’ (94). However, these relationships to and with the symbolic and its demands do not necessarily resist the status of the symbolic ‘as immutable law’ (106).

Drag king embodiments of masculinity together with the eroticisation of female masculinity and other sexed positions and identifications, effectively mutate the demands of symbolic laws for their own queer pleasures and erotic identifications, but they do not necessarily alter, or even seek to alter, the structure of those demands. In fact, the structure of those demands will be seen as the productive force behind any
‘mutation’ of them, effectively providing the means by which female masculinity is and can be instanced, embodied and eroticised, and the means by which the laws of the symbolic can be contested. But, like Butler, I don’t pretend to imagine that contesting the laws of the symbolic somehow rearticulates the terms by which those laws come to govern gender, sexuality or sexed positions. Such contestations – for instance, the pleasurable embodiments and eroticisations of female masculinity played out within drag king culture – are perpetually rendered and relegated to the ‘illegitimate’ through a heterosexist economy that disempowers such contestatory possibilities ‘by rendering them culturally unthinkable and unviable from the start’ (111). This logic says that ‘(W)hat is outside the law, before the law’ does not and cannot exist (111). But as Butler notes, abject figures, and those practices rendered illegitimate are never fully repudiated, and are, ironically, made legitimate, because they must be ‘entertained’ in order to be repudiated, in order to be rendered illegitimate. Cast as ‘unthinkable’, as a ‘failed’ and abject figure, the masculine female – female masculinity – becomes at once both ‘impossible’ and ‘possible’ simply through the ‘logic of repudiation’ that governs and, paradoxically, destabilises the assumption of ‘proper’ subject positions (111).

Through their pleasurable and erotic negotiations with other abject and repudiated subject positions and practices, drag kings and their audiences seek to legitimate, for their own pleasures, that which is construed and made to be illegitimate. And by taking physical and psychological enjoyment from a variety of subject positions ‘whose characterisations by conventional notions of femininity … are confounded by their manifest complexity’, drag kings and their audiences proliferate a range of Camp female identifications and desires that effectively negotiate with and mutate the presumptive laws of the symbolic (110).

Butler offers an analysis of the cultural configuration of power that organises the normative and productive operations of the symbolic – the structure of its demands. It is worthwhile highlighting aspects of that analysis in order to speculate on drag king ‘mutations’ of the symbolic as specifically Camp tactics born out by the necessity to name and make real the embodiment, the various pleasures, and the eroticisation of female masculinity, rather than to establish those tactics as somehow outside of, or above the symbolic. What is hopefully becoming apparent is that those figures and sexed positions that the symbolic names as abjected, excluded, impossible, or to be
repudiated, become ‘sites of erotic cathexis\(^\text{20}\)” in drag kinging and drag king culture, and effectively ‘refigure, redistribute, and resignify the constituents of that symbolic’ (109). Effectively, drag kinging’s dynamics will be seen as a Camp – as a queer – rearticulation of the symbolic, not as a direct repudiation of it, and in this sense, it can be said to constitute a ‘subversive rearticulation of that symbolic’ (109).

As previously discussed, Butler understands the symbolic as ‘the normative dimension of the constitution of the sexed subject within language’ (106). She writes:

> It consists in a series of demands, taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealizations, and threats – *performative speech acts*, as it were, that wield the power to produce the field of culturally viable sexual subjects: *performative acts*, in other words, with the power to produce or materialize subjectivating effects (106 my emphasis).

The discursive performativity of the symbolic’s demands ‘appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make’ (107). However, the ‘productive capacity of discourse’ is derivative; it is inherently a form of ‘iterability or rearticulation, a practice of resignification, not creation ex nihilo’ (107). In other words, a performative ‘act’ serves to produce that which it declares. ‘As a discursive practice (performative ‘acts’ must be repeated to become efficacious), performatives constitute a locus of *discursive production*’ (107). Butler examines how the authority of a law does not reside within the person who affects the law; they do not ‘originate the law or its authority’. Rather, they cite the law; they consult and reinvoke the law, ‘and in that reinvocation’ they reconstitute the law (107). They are part of a signifying chain that receives and recites the law, and it is within the reciting of the law, argues Butler, that the authority of the law is echoed forth, and when ‘the law functions as ordinance or sanction, it operates as an imperative that brings into being that which it legally enjoins and protects’ (107). That law works only by ‘reworking a set of already operative conventions’ and they are ‘grounded in no other legitimating authority than the echo-chain of their own reinvocation’ (107). And if to pronounce, to utter or cite a law through *reinvocation* is, paradoxically, to seek recourse to an authoritative convention that precedes that law, then that law becomes susceptible to ‘reconstitution and resignification’ within the terms of its own discourse (107). In this case, asks Butler, how does and where does the law draw its authority from? ‘Is there an original

\(^{20}\)Cathexis’ is a psychoanalytic term that refers to the libidinal energy invested in some idea or person or object connected with gratification. http://psychology.jrank.org/pages/105/Cathexis.html
authority, a primary source, or is it, in the very practice of citation, potentially infinite in its regression, that the ground of authority is constituted as perpetual deferral? (108)

It is within and through an infinite deferral to an ‘irrecoverable past’, argues Butler, that authority constitutes itself, and that deferral is ‘the repeated act by which legitimation occurs’ (108). Further, and in regard to sexed positions, if one’s ‘position’ can ‘be secured only by being repeatedly assumed’, then it not ‘a singular act or event, but, rather an iterable practice’ (108). What Butler highlights is that what remains inherent in the act of ‘assuming’ a sexed position, is the need to repeat, to re-cite, to ‘mime’ the norms that govern sexed positions: ‘And a citation will be at once an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation’ (108). Authority’s ground then, is essentially groundless.

The power of the symbolic, and the heteronormative laws that govern gender and sexuality, are produced ‘by the citational instance by which the law is embodied’ (108). The norms as laws that govern sexed positions, gendered identification, and sexuality through various threats of punishment, are not in themselves more powerful than any efforts to identify with them. Those norms become invested with their power through what Butler calls a ‘double movement’. In citing those norms, ‘an identification (re)invokes and (re)invests’ those norms and laws, seeking recourse to them as a constituting authority that precedes any instancing of them (108). Additionally, the ‘priority and authority’ of those norms and laws is ‘constituted through that recursive turn, such that citation … effectively brings into being the very prior authority to which it then defers’ (108-109). What Butler is suggesting then, is that authority is ‘derived from the contemporary instance of its citation’, not from somewhere prior; that it is, ‘in fact, produced as the effect of citation itself’ (109). There is ‘no prior position which legislates, initiates, or motivates the various efforts to embody or instantiate that position’ (109).

Butler’s pragmatic examination of the authority that lies behind the governance of subject constitution, and in particular sexed positions, exposes those authorities and the embodying of sexed positions as nothing more than the repeated citation of them. Neither ‘can be said to preexist their various embodyings and citings’ (108). If to assume a sexed/gendered identification is to only ever cite, ‘mime’ or phantasmatically
identify with the law that authorises identification, then it can only ever be an
interpretation. And as Butler argues, if to cite the law is to interpret it, then that citing
becomes an occasion to expose the law ‘itself as a privileged interpretation’ (108).
Neither sexed or gendered identification, nor the law that authorises them, ‘can be said
to pre-exist their various embodyings and citings’ (108). ‘Citing’ the law becomes the
mobilising of that law, and as Butler writes, the ‘power of the symbolic is itself
produced by the citational instance by which the law is embodied’ (108). In addition,
she argues that symbolic law – ‘the norms that govern sexed positions’ – are not
inherently ‘larger or more powerful that any of the imaginary efforts to identify with
them’ (108). Any sexed position, according to Butler, is a ‘fiction produced in the course
of its instancings’ (109). And since symbolic law ‘must be repeated to remain an
authoritative law’, and is ‘produced as the effect of citation itself” (109), the law,
‘perpetually reinstitutes the possibility of its own failure’ (108). In light of this there
also exists the possibility of embodying and identifying with what are considered
‘wayward’ or ‘failed’ sexed positions. The law reinstitutes and enables that which it
perpetually seeks to restrict, refuse, prohibit, and render impossible.

Implicit in Butler’s analysis of the structures that organise the normative and productive
operations of the symbolic, and simultaneously the heteronormative laws that govern
gender and sexuality, is the notion of performativity in the securing of those structures.
Those laws seek recourse to their own reiteration in order for them to be cited as law.
They are not inherently powerful but are the effect of performative ‘speech acts’ or
performative ‘acts’ (109). Performativity in this instance refers to the production of that
which it ‘names’ in order to simultaneously enact – to ‘do’ and to ‘make’ – its own
referent. For example, the laws that govern gender ‘name’ female masculinity as failed
femininity, as failed womanhood, but they can only name it as such by repeatedly
referring back to or seeking recourse to a legislative norm that is itself dependent upon
its own reiteration.

Again, there is no prior or precultural ‘law’ that can be asserted as preexisting its own
embodyings or citations. The notion of female masculinity as failed femininity exists
only by virtue of its reinvocation. The power to sustain that (re)invocation is and
remains a product of the instance of its citation. With that said, female masculinity,
under the purview and power of current and dominant laws of gender, is ‘done’, is
‘made’, through recourse to the very same laws that have both installed it and repudiated it through naming it. The critical difference here is that whilst drag king embodiments of female masculinity, and audience appreciation of that masculinity, secure that masculinity through prevailing and dominant laws of gender, they do not experience that masculinity as a failure or as an abject identification, but rather as an ‘inverted’ subject position that provokes and signals pleasure, erotic and otherwise.

The structure and authority of those laws is deconstructed by Butler to highlight their contingent nature. That is, their reliance on repeatedly re/citing those laws through an endless ‘recursive return’ to them. Through this inherent reliance on recitation they do indeed effectively perpetuate the possibility of their own failure. It is the very structure of this process that occasions the production, embodiment and interpretations of female masculinity as failed womanhood, but it is also the very structure of this process that affords a (re)production, (re)embodiment and (re)interpretation of female masculinity that signals various pleasures, rather than feelings of failure and abjection.

Performatives function ‘to name and to do, to name and to make’ (107), and in their perverse reinscriptions and resignifications of female masculinity, drag kings and their audiences identify with and invert abject subject positions, embody and re-embody abject subject positions, submit to and pleasurably resist subject positions constructed as abject. Drag king and audience resignifications of female masculinity, along with the enacting and occupation of cross-identificatory practices and positions that the symbolic seeks to restrict within binary configurations of ‘normal’ (i.e. heterosexuality and ‘proper’ femininity), and ‘not normal’ (i.e. homosexuality and ‘improper’ femininity), are formulated and produced ‘through and against abjection’ (110). In addition, the resignification and occupation of those identifications and practices through and against abjection, effectively reformulate and proliferate symbolic and heteronormative laws through specifically Camp strategies and manoeuvres.

If as Butler suggests sexed and gendered positions are always produced through reiteration, and reiteration can ‘be read as a kind of performativity’ (107), then couldn’t performativity be read as constitutive of the subject? Couldn’t subjectivity be read as those corporeal and embodied acts we engage in and practice, that we ‘do’, in order to produce or manifest social visibility and modes of being? Drag kinging and female masculinity’s perverse employment of symbolic demands and heteronormative laws,
and the simultaneous contestation of them within drag king culture, are queerly executed experiences meant to provide contextually and culturally viable subject positions. They are also embodied and performative acts that have the power to ‘produce or materialize subjectivating effects’ (105-106). Whilst Butler might suggest that such embodiments, performances and subjectivating effects may constitute a ‘temporary escape from the constituting power of the law’, she argues that they ‘cannot enter into the dynamic by which the symbolic reiterates its power’, and therefore, cannot ‘alter the structural sexism and homophobia of its sexual demands’ (106).

However, as I have been alluding to throughout this chapter, it is not drag kinging’s intention to resist outright or even to ‘escape’ from the laws and heteronormative structures that govern gender and sexuality, nor are drag kinging’s identifications with and desires for female masculinity interpreted and made meaningful through repudiating or disavowing their constitutive relationship with those structures. It is precisely the mediating effects of those structures that provide the means for drag kinging and female masculinity to be viable, coherent, and meaningful Camp ‘acts’ and identificatory practices.

As a queerly executed embodiment and performance, female masculinity perversely relies on both the integrity of symbolic laws and the structures that govern us all as gendered and sexed beings, and their constitutive instability. And as queerly executed embodiments and performances, drag kinging allows for the circulation of erotic exchanges and identificatory alliances that perversely reflect and contest the mechanisms of those laws and structures. As I have continued to emphasise, it is the very laws of the symbolic and heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality, ordered and authorised through an ‘exclusionary logic’ of repudiation and impossible identifications, which provide the occasion for their perversion and eroticisation through a pleasurable inversion, or reformulation of them (112). The prohibitive forces of these laws and structures provide, via their need to exclude and foreclose – in other words, provide within their own logic – the opportunity for complex connections and identificatory practices that, within the realm of that logic, were never meant to be pursued.

In drag kinging these become subject positions, eroticised practices, identifications and cross-identifications, which create and are experienced as an irresolvable but
pleasurable tension between submission to, reformulation of, and perversion of those laws and structures respectively (115). As this indicates, there is a certain ambivalence that lies at the heart of drag kinging and its celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity. Although this ambivalence operates through and highlights the constraints on gendered and sexed positions, it also at the same time highlights their constitutive instability, and thus their vulnerability to perversely (re)inscriptions of them. The promotion of this ambivalence through the performance and embodiment of masculinities on and through female bodies, and through other cross-identificatory connections and practices, both mobilises and destabilises signs of masculinity(s) and other gendered and sexed positions, but, and more importantly for these women, that ambivalence especially facilitates the opportunity to engage with incoherent and complex identificatory practices, connections and positions that are otherwise made unavailable to or ‘impossible’ for them. By ‘imitating’, identifying with, and embodying various masculinities – heterosexual, homosexual, ‘improper’ femininity – and taking up other subject positions and identifications, drag kings perversely (mis)identify with a variety of sexed positions, which are, ironically, constructed and abjected simultaneously. This highlights drag kinging’s complicity with and performance of those forms of masculinity(s) and ‘other’ positions that are ‘organising figures within the Lacanian symbolic’ (103). More specifically, they are performing and taking pleasure from the ‘restrictive spectres’ – the masculinized woman, the female homosexual, all those figures of ‘abjection’, all those other ‘wrong identifications’ – that haunt that symbolic (104).

In the Lacanian symbolic Butler argues that the ‘hierarchized and differentiated specular’ relationship that governs and stabilises the sexed positions of masculine and feminine, is established through ‘the exclusion and abjection of a domain of relations in which all the wrong identifications are pursued’ (103). That is, not only are the ‘feminized fag and the ‘phallicised dyke’ both inarticulate but organising figures of abjection and punishment for not being ‘properly’ sexed, but Butler is suggesting there is a whole host of other identificatory and sexed positions and practices that are foreclosed from the symbolic (103). As the drag king narratives throughout this thesis demonstrate, it is these other identificatory positions and practices that drag kings employ, re-organise, and eroticise according to and in the service of their own desires and fantasies, paying little regard to symbolic demands and their restrictive limitations.
Such practices and identifications may employ complex and elaborate sexual and
gendered identifications, which are constructed as organising figures in the symbolic,
but are rendered unthinkable and abject, or are entirely foreclosed. For instance, the
classic symbolic ‘hierarchical and specular’ relationship of he ‘has’ the phallus, *but only if*
she ‘reflects his having’ (which effectively constructs woman as the phallus, but
woman as castrated also potentially threatens castration) is both perversely played out
and perversely perverted in drag kinging through erotic and pleasurable identifications.
Further, drag kings may also take on positions that might include wishing to ‘be’ or
conversely ‘have’ the phallus for ‘other men’, by openly engaging in homoerotic play
between and amongst drag kings (103). As ‘men’, drag kings might wish to ‘have’ the
phallus for other women who are ‘it’, or they may wish to ‘be’ the phallus for other
women and for other drag kings who ‘have’ it. For female audiences, erotic
identification might include participating in ‘being’ the phallus for the drag king/woman
by reflecting his/her ‘having’, or it might include wishing to ‘have it’ for the drag king –
as woman ‘underneath’ – who ‘is it’.

At this point it should also be emphasised that although the phallus, constructed as the
‘privileged signifier’ *par excellence* of the symbolic order (Butler 1993, 79), ‘circulates
out of line’ through the cross-identificatory positions played out in drag king culture,
*the phallus/penis conflation (confusion) still exists*, and the popularity of ‘packing’ in
order to simulate a penis bulge supports this assertion. However, surely its traditional
status within a heterosexual or ‘masculinist’ context is displaced within the
female/female context of drag king culture (103). Indeed, I would argue for this
displacement as a specifically queer female re-articulation of the phallus/penis
conflation in the name of queer female desires. However, that queer re-articulation still
highlights how the phallus/penis conflation continues to operate in a privileged way in
contemporary society and sexual cultures. Drag kings and their audiences are not
immune from this conflation. However, I would still maintain that within drag king
culture appropriations of the phallus/penis relationship be seen as a direct and queer
(mis)appropriation of that relationship, and a reformulation of it within a queer female
economy of desire and exchange.
3.2 You want really good dick and you want a woman to wear it?

A ‘phallic female’ is not at all the same thing as a man.
- Tamsin Wilton  *Finger-licking Good* (198).

Personal narratives suggest that ‘packing’, usually with a dildo or socks, is almost *de rigueur* for drag kings. As Elon of the Chicago Kings writes: ‘it’s important to have something in my pants. I mean, it’s like I wouldn’t play baseball without a bat’. Debbie, as Max Hollywood, also adds how important packing is for her when she writes, ‘it goes along with the erotic appeal. I get very sexually charged when I pack, that energy then feeds into everything I do while in drag’. Fellow Chicago drag king Sam, as Mr Big, writes, ‘a little extra weight in the crotch helps me to stay in character, and makes me feel sexy in its own way’, adding that it helps her to complete the illusion of ‘stereotypical maleness’ she is trying to create. Perhaps Amber, as Billy T. Holley, sums it up best when she writes that packing is ‘like the icing on the cake of illusion. It completes the whole package, no pun intended’.

The complex, erotic and cross-identificatory practices and exchanges that can be played out and performed in drag kinging are many and varied, and as I suggested previously, it is the personal narratives of the drag kings themselves that I wish to give preference to in order to explain and illustrate this. It is worth including many of those explanations as they are expanded upon and shaped by the first-hand ‘voices’ of those women, in order to emphasise the erotic and cross-identificatory practices engaged with in drag king culture, as specifically, and queerly executed, female exchanges. In addition, it is my hope that by including many of those first-hand accounts and personal narratives, any attempt at generalising or otherwise prescribing those ‘voices’ is thwarted, and the promotion of queer female desires and sexuality is elaborated upon and circulated.

Si’le as Luster, the ‘packing’ drag king who performs Lustivious Dela Virgion the Drag Queen, is just one of the drag kings who perfectly illustrates the queer exchanges permitted and promoted within drag king culture. She writes how wearing a pack, for instance, makes her ‘very aware of the ‘fantasy’ that we (as drag kings) are providing’ for audiences: ‘for me packing creates an arena where people ask me whether I am man
or woman, and when I say, ‘I’m whatever you want me to be’ a dialogue is opened’. Further, Si’le adds that ‘Luster and Lusty are very queer, that way they have more room to explore; they don’t really spend a whole lot of time in those trappings (gay, straight, bi, or other labels of sexuality); they like what they like when they like it’. As another example of such crossings of desire and identification, I asked Jen if she was still a lesbian when in drag, and she replied ‘nope’, even though she ‘still likes girls for the most part’. She discusses and defines as ‘funny’ how she does not ‘like boys as Jen’, but when in drag ‘Jay (her drag king persona) doesn’t mind them from time to time!’ Being in drag as Jay, gives Jen the opportunity to engage in homoerotic and homosocial relations and play with other drag kings. Melanie as drag king Jake Danger of the Disposable Boy Toys, writes that when she is ‘doing drag, I get to do things I wouldn’t normally get to do on stage as a woman’: ‘I can dance in a boy band, I can croon to the ladies, or I can play out some gay male fantasy with another king. I don’t think this just continues the separation of the sexes though…. For me, I’m still a woman up on stage regardless of the binding and facial hair’.

In addition, Melanie discusses how in her troupe and her drag king community, ‘we and our friends and lovers and potential lovers are all in drag. So, your desire for a certain person is not suddenly turned off when they put on facial hair’: ‘So, now you are faced with desiring this person who looks like a guy and you’re a guy as well. I think that makes some people uncomfortable but gives others a chance to explore another type of sexuality they didn’t previously have access to’.

When I asked Melanie about drag kinging facilitating ‘other’ identities and sexualities she wrote ‘sure’, but then continued to narrate a story that she claimed was not ‘really about performance’:

I’ve been to a number of play parties in San Francisco. And when I was in that space I sort of identified as a boy/guy even though I was clearly a dyke in dyke space. I didn’t do facial hair but I did bind and pack. The last play party I went to I didn’t bind or pack and I felt really weird. I was still dressed pretty butch, but I was so aware of being female.

What does Melanie’s story suggest? Outside of the culture and community of drag kinging, Melanie perceives the cross-identificatory practices engaged with in ‘play
parties’ as non-performative, yet, like drag king culture they clearly entail the performance and embodiment of certain ‘signs’ and gender ‘codes’ in order for those identifications to be validated and eroticised. When dressed ‘butch’ and not as a ‘boy’, Melanie ‘feels weird’ and is made aware of her femaleness, as if feeling ‘female’ – and I take this to mean her gendered ‘display’ as opposed to her biological femaleness – means not being able to ‘fit’ into the play party space. When Melanie is in the same ‘play party space’, which is also clearly a ‘dyke space’, and is identifying as both a dyke and a ‘guy’, she is enacting and embodying identifications that become intelligible and efficacious because they are contextualised within certain social boundaries and parameters. Like drag king culture, the play party context is a specific sociocultural, sociosexual, and physical environment that can function as the ‘setting’ for both the display and legitimisation of female masculinities in their various guises, although play parties are perhaps more specific sociocultural and sociosexual spaces in which sex and gender categories operate for the purpose of play party practices. However, both drag king cultures and play parties are contextualised spaces that provide the environment and opportunity for women to engage in the embodiment and eroticisation of ‘other’ identifications, and to have them acknowledged and understood as specific gendered and sexualised identifications. And both spaces provide ‘safe’ forums and celebratory environments for queer female desires and sexualities to be expressed and explored. In addition, drag kinging’s inclusive culture provides a forum for female spectators who may not be interested in ‘putting on’ or embodying masculinity, but who desire it in other women. It could also be said that their involvement becomes an important part of that culture, insofar as their involvement as an audience aids in the confirmation and eroticisation of female masculinity; as Alana writes, ‘I think the two go hand in hand’. In effect, the participation of a desiring audience can also serve to contribute to the legitimacy of female masculinity, and to the cross-identificatory and erotic practices that are engaged in within drag king cultures. Further, Melanie endorses the inclusive nature of drag king culture when she writes: ‘Kinging affords me all kinds of freedom. The freedom to perform, to do and say things I wouldn’t normally say, [and] to desire and be desired by those I wouldn’t normally desire or be desired by’.

Regina, a German drag king who performs Rikki Gino Martin, extends on the freedom that drag kinging affords, when she remarks on the transformative nature of drag kinging. ‘I’m a gay man in the body of a lesbian woman’, and further adds that this especially applies when her partner does drag too: ‘we go as a gay couple’. For Regina,
who identifies as a ‘full-time dyke, even if I look femme’, drag gives her the opportunity to be ‘more butch’, to be ‘a real gentleman’, and she goes even further to suggest that being in drag makes her ‘dress and behave different [sic], better than usual’.

For Sarah, who performs Shawn, drag kinging is a highly political act, but also pleasurable and sexy. She writes that because ‘gender permeates our world…. Performing gender could never be non-political’. However, she also adds that ‘it’s pleasurable because it makes me feel sexy. But, I think that feeling sexy is political too. Good women, proper women, aren’t supposed to feel sexy’. For Sarah, performing as a drag king allows her ‘to shift gears’, permits her to feel sexy and to express that sexiness in an arena where female displays and embodiments of ‘sexiness’ are celebrated and lauded, not denigrated or deemed ‘improper’. When I asked her whether she identified as a lesbian, and whether this remained the case when she was in drag, she replied, ‘I identify as a queer lesbian…. Hmmm this question is slightly confusing’:

I do identify as a lesbian, and in previous performances I have identified as a lesbian when I was in the middle of performing. But at that point I hadn’t really ‘gone to town’ in terms of dressing myself up in a character. I would imagine the more I got into it, the less I would feel like a dyke when I’m performing. However, I also don’t think I’ll feel quite like a man. Do you mean am I attracted to women when I’m in drag? Is that who I perform for? Or do I become a gay man? If this is what you mean, I’d say that probably, I’ll be a gay man when performing. But oddly enough, I’d be a gay man performing for the pleasure of lesbians who find gay men’s sexuality appealing.

Paralleling Sarah’s experience of both purposely ‘confusing’ and playing with identity, is E, who performs Noah Boyz. When I asked her the same question, she replied; ‘does doing drag erase my identity? No. There are several things going on during drag. It is a dyke doing a boy or a dyke doing gay boy, or …’, and here she purposely left space to add whatever sexuality or sexual role I might think of. E’s response indicates that doing drag allows her to access and role-play a variety of subject positions and sexualities, without being restricted to or by her identity as a dyke. I think E’s comments below sum up beautifully what I continue to suggest of drag kinging; that as a specifically queer, and Camp practice, drag kinging permits women to engage in, embody and eroticise female masculinity, and other cross-identifications and practices, within a
culture of inclusiveness and celebration. Indeed, it remains a culture that promotes the performance and exchange of queer female desires. She writes: ‘I think being queer frees me up to play with gender (and sexuality) in ways that straight women feel restricted by. Something about existing outside the realm of heteronormativity allows gender non-conformity’.

Julia, as drag king Jake, extends on the polymorphous playground of drag king culture, when she suggests how drag kinging permits a type of ‘gender disobedience’ to be accessed and found desirable. Doing drag, she writes, allows her ‘to bust out of’ the confines of gender categories that have traditionally ‘boxed’ her – and others – in. If there is a ‘desire for maleness wrapped up’ in her performance, it is, she writes, ‘really just the desire to be able to be a masculinely identified woman…. I want to be able to do ‘boy things’ and still be recognized as belonging to the group woman’. She also adds that doing drag allows her to ‘be expressive in ways I feel constrained [sic] in everyday life’. Not only that, she writes how drag kinging ‘absolutely allows me to desire certain masculinities’, going further to say how particular female masculinities, as they are embodied and performed through other women, have been masculinities she has always desired, ‘but never acted on because I don’t want to be with men’. For Julia, drag kinging both allows and extends on the polymorphous identifications that queer women, like her, embody or choose to identify with, in addition to being a performance and sociocultural space where she can desire and be desired for the female masculinities on display. In addition it is Julia’s belief that drag kinging allows women ‘to access other sides of themselves’, a belief that parallels other kings’, and my own suggestions, that drag kinging opens up the possibility to adopt and engage in other modes of being and identificatory practices, and to derive pleasures, erotic and otherwise from doing so. She writes: ‘I have seen the experience of kining opening up people’s lives in ways they didn’t even know they could access. Allowing one to tap more deeply into oneself is always going to have a transformative potential, and that is what I believe drag kinging allows’.

Del’s comments also seem to support this statement when she writes ‘drag can make you feel less yourself, enabling your character to do things that you might not … the performing drag king Del is a very serious, strong and angular performer, I actually think he is a bit scary too’. Del writes further on the transformative effects of drag
kinging when she reveals both the flexibility of her sexuality in connection to what her audiences might want her to be, or are attracted to, and a heightened sense of herself as a sexual person when in drag:

I can be lesbian, straight or gay when in drag. I have realised this from time to time when examining the fact that lesbians, gay guys, straight guys, straight women and trannies have all been attracted to me in drag. I think essentially I am just ‘sexual’ when in drag. I tend not to be a terribly sexual being when I’m just everyday Del.

Stacey’s understanding of drag kinging as both transformative and enabling of cross-identifications as bodily experience is borne out by her comment that drag offers her an ‘extremity of experience’. She writes that ‘its [sic] fun to occupy an extreme version of gendered space (and) my drag character, Johnny Kat, is a parody of maleness, style and southern culture’:

The fantasy of a big redneck with a huge cock informs my particular drag persona…. Johnny Kat is derivative of extreme parodies of my male southern relatives and the men I observed in both California and Texas. I felt all (or most) were symbols of bad taste, bad manners, sexism and social awkwardness. Johnny Kat has all these qualities … but is willing to make himself look stupid to achieve his male fantasy … he reveals his humanness, maleness, insecurity and desire to be another.

Stacey further writes, ‘the fantasy elements that play into my performances of Johnny Kat are my (previous) adolescent desires to look ‘tough’ or ‘hard’ [in contrast to] being sensitive, emotional etc…. drag lets me play with these fantasies’. In addition, Stacey elaborates on the freedoms that embodying Johnny Kat allows her. She writes how drag permits the ‘lines marking the boundaries between self and other [to be] sashayed and blurred’, and after attending a special drag king event she wrote:

I rejoiced to find that I could suddenly be a horny gay man, or a repressed homosexual freeing his ‘natural’ instincts in the dark, or a cold heterosexual man being flirted with by a shy young woman, or a self-celebrating redneck out of town. One of the effects I most enjoy about drag is the way it creates physical, vocal, and sexual space in which I feel freer to move. I am both protected and enabled by my alter ego.
Stacey also mentions how when in drag she and other drag kings ‘flirt with each other as fags… I feel freedom to flirt in ways that I normally would not out of character … it is fun to stray those sexual boundaries’. Drag, she writes, ‘has an air of permissiveness, anything goes and the more outrageous the better. I love this freedom to open up, to perform any way I want … and I never have to censor myself’.

For Jordan, doing drag is more overtly sexual and erotic, permitting her the opportunity to use a ‘functional pack’ (a strap on or dildo) so she ‘can make the most of being a boi for the night’. She writes of the freedom that kinging affords her as being ‘mostly sexual … I get a huge sexual charge from getting into drag …[and] strapping it on and doing it like a boi’. She adds, that as a type of body technology, drag kinging allows her ‘to be me but as a boy…. It’s weird, because if I was a man, I think I might be gay or least bi … [although] I used to be a lesbian, but now its [sic] dyke or queer’. In addition, Jordan writes of her experiences flirting with gay men: ‘I make a cute boy, so its [sic] kind of fun to go to the gay boys clubs and be silly with them’. Drag kinging allows Jordan to engage in cross-identifications and practices that not only provide her with sexual and erotic pleasures, but also lets her embody and engage with her own fantasies of what she envisages and desires her masculine self to be: ‘I like to look like the sort of man I imagine I would be if I was one. I like to be butch, sexy and mischievous’.

Drag king Will Dewar’s responses also extend on the idea of drag kinging facilitating an/other self, or perhaps more accurately, drag kinging aids in projecting what one imagines and fantasises the self to be if one were ‘a man’. Will makes mention of how drag has enabled her to define her sexual identity more clearly and in line with her specific erotic desires. She identifies as a ‘queer butch boi top’, and writes how drag kinging is ‘a continuation of myself, or better worded, my true self’. The fantasies and desires that influence her masculinity remain a mix of ‘gay boy flamboyance’ and ‘bad boy rebel/player’, and her drag king persona is ‘new wave meets hip-hop meets performance artist meets rocker meets gender fucker meets gay boy meets teenage boy meets cute, cute, cute!’ When asked about the freedom that kinging might afford her, Will writes: ‘Well it’s a character you’re creating and performing. Like I said before,

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21 ‘Boi’ is a term used to describe non-biological masculinity or a non-biological man. It is often employed by drag kings to describe themselves, other drag kings, some butch-identified women, and female-to-male transgenderists.
it’s still an extension of one’s self, but with the freedom of this character, and playing this character within a cool sub-culture within a queer community’.

Alana’s comments on drag kinging as being an ‘extension’ of the self are similar to Will’s when she mentions how ‘right’ performing as a drag king felt for her, in addition to being an erotic and sexual corporeal experience. She writes:

I do not identify as transgender, but do believe that I do not identify as wholly female or feminine, and drag kinging has helped me access my own masculinity and control the way I represent that part of myself to others…. I perform in drag because I am interested in exploring those parts of me that I often don’t feel comfortable expressing in my everyday life … being overtly sexual or masculine, especially …. I fantasize about working my phantom cock to such effect that the illusion ‘works’ for audience members that they find what I’m doing appreciable and desirable, even if I’m not completely ‘real’ or fully convincing as a male subject…. Drag kinging makes me feel like a fun, sexy, powerful person. It’s exhilarating. I feel like I can possess the cock that’s not biologically mine, this part amazed me when I first started kinging – I didn’t expect that that pair of socks would feel like an extension of myself.

Maureen, as drag king Mo B Dick, suggests that drag kinging is a form of ‘sexual terrorism’, because it ‘blows open people’s minds about the infinite possibilities of sexuality’. Maureen’s desire to do drag kinging grew out of her refusal to be limited by the traditional exclusivity of gender binaries, and she writes, ‘instead of being an angry woman I became a funny man’. On a more intimate level Maureen sees drag kinging as a form of erotic ‘role playing’, writing, ‘I have an erect penis (and there is) a sexual charge from wearing a dildo’. But for her, the eroticism of drag kinging remains a combined effect of the power of her performance as gendered deviance, the seductive space of drag king culture, and being the centre of attention when she performs. Kate, who performs drag kings Mack Million and Pedro Coeur de Roy, extends on this when she writes, ‘it’s a very perverse and exciting experience to be embraced by audiences as well as being part of an audience as a voyeur’. In addition, Kate sees her drag king personas as offering ‘perverse ways of expressing different desires and fantasies that I might have as a lesbian’:

Having one’s hand over another king’s crotch is a pretty erotic encounter. But more than the excitement surrounding what’s in a king’s packed lunch, is the knowing that behind
every good bloke there’s a gorgeous chick. There’s something incredibly desirable about knowing there’s a grrrl [sic] underneath all the attire and grooming. Being around other drag kings who are femme by day and kings by night also holds its own appeal. It’s a kind of perversity that repositions the everyday or the expected, and by that I mean it’s like seeing someone who’s a gorgeous woman becoming even more desirable dressed as, and performing a bloke!

Kate’s, and the other drag kings’ comments, attest to the inclusive but nonetheless contextualised experiences of drag kinging. Drag king culture emerges as a space that provides a ‘social sphere of enactment’ that can transform self-identifications based in fantasy and desire, into identifications that are materialised and re-signified on and through the female body (Hale 1997, 229). Not only that, as a contextualised space for the embodiment and enactment of female masculinity and other gendered and erotic practices, drag king culture provides the opportunity for women to ‘change the personal and social meanings’ of gendered and sexualised bodies, whereby sex and gender categories operate for the specific purpose of legitimating and realising particular female fantasies and desires. In this sense, drag king culture, as a specific cultural location, can provide a ‘spatial and discursive boundary between cultures’, where once that boundary is passed, ‘dominant cultural sex/gender categories are not entirely superseded’, but are ‘superseded by another, incommensurable set of sex/gender categories’ (234). And although drag king culture legitimates the polymorphous identifications and desires that women engage with through drag kinging, it should be remembered that drag king performativities are not totally unregulated. To be intelligible, to be efficacious, such performativities cannot be ‘read’, indeed cannot be made meaningful for performer or spectator, without there being culturally available constructs and discourses of phallicism, masculinity, male, femininity and female, for instance, into which such performances can be positioned and negotiated (229).

With that said though, drag king culture and drag king performances are less bound by or confined to the social and cultural regulations of masculinity and femininity that restrict men and women in society. Female masculinity and drag king performatives are validated within drag king culture. They occur in a context separate from certain definitions and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, which can serve to act as constraints on men and women respectively. That is, those performativities are less ‘inflected by such vectors of power as race, ethnicity, class, (and) sexual
orientation’, although they still operate within larger frameworks of gendered, sexed, racist, classed and patriarchal culture (225).

It is within drag king culture that female masculinity, as it is materialised and made legible on a culturally intelligible female body, can be re-signified as desirable and powerful, rather than signalling an abject or failed figure of womanhood. By celebrating and eroticising female masculinity, drag kings and drag king culture perversely and ‘queerly’ contest symbolic laws and heteronormative constructions of femininity and female sexuality and desire. Not only that, through enacting, embodying, and taking queer pleasure from sexed positions and practices that those laws and constructions paradoxically institute only to continually limit, otherwise proscribe, or produce as impossible, drag kings and drag king culture perversely institute the possibilities of identifying with ‘errant’ or abject sexed positions and practices.

I have included lengthy drag king narratives not only to engage the reader with some of the specifics of drag kinging’s dynamics, but also to highlight how these narratives all point to the fact that kinging effects erotic and other pleasurable identificatory practices and modes of being, outside of or in addition to what is ‘normally expected’ of women, or even imagined by the women themselves. What is also apparent is that nearly all the drag kings stated that their sexuality informed their choice to do drag, perhaps because existing inside heteronormative conventions on gender and sexuality as ‘outside’ (and ‘outsider’) of them, allows for more flexibility in terms of pushing those boundaries and ‘terrorising’ them for perverse pleasures. Nearly all have hinted at, chafed against, or been sensitive to the gender prescriptions of our culture and society, particularly those for women. In addition, although drag kinging and drag king culture encourages polysemic viewing and identificatory positions for all involved, and remains open to multiple interpretations, I suggest there is one ‘constant’ in drag kinging, and that is the role that the ‘female’ body plays as a culturally meaningful ‘meeting point’ in structuring, contextualising and making sense of those interpretations. In this sense, drag kinging is refracted through a specifically female economy of interpretation that is both product of, and resistant to, the dominant and prevailing prescriptions on female bodies, behaviour, sexuality and desires.
Nearly all of the women have chosen to employ the term queer to describe their drag king selves or their performances, even if they identify as lesbian, dyke or other. When considered as both intimately personal but inclusive experiences, the cross-identifications and practices that these women engage in through drag kinging and within drag king culture, emerge as complex negotiations with dominant and prevailing laws on gender and sexuality, particularly those for women. Such polymorphous experiences and practices are, I suggest, realised through a queer or Camp affectation of identifications and practices that would, within the constraints of symbolic and heteronormative rules on gender and sexuality, normally be considered impossible or otherwise abject. The complex ‘circuit(s) of exchange’ that are played out and eroticised in drag kinging effectively reorganise a series of identifications and practices that symbolic and heteronormative laws formulate in order to establish their laws on ‘proper’ sexed positions only to then render them ‘impossible’. Those exchanges, I suggest, move through and beyond that formulation, to a subversive re-formulation and rearticulation still within the terms of those laws (Butler 1993, 103).

In addition, such a rearticulation also suggests that drag kings and masculine-identified women refuse to acquiesce to those laws as failed or ‘punished/punishable’ women. And with particular reference to symbolic laws, the numerous erotic, sexual and identificatory sites that drag kings inhabit are indeed reformulations of ‘possibilities that already exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible (Butler 1999, 189). Further, by locating subversive sexual and identificatory sites as an effect of – as produced or generated by and through – dominant cultural configurations and discourses of sex and gender, they become ‘articulable’ within and through those configurations and discourses (190). This serves to establish such sites as intelligible and meaningful for the women who queerly engage with and in them. It also highlights how engagement with those sites can confound and contest the very binarism that heteronormative laws on gender and sexuality continue to construct and organise themselves by, and paradoxically, employ to foreclose the very sexual and cross-identificatory possibilities that exist as their repudiated but present ‘others’.
3.3 Behind every good man is an even better woman

Whilst any identification is said to remain ‘tied’ to the symbolic – remains structured by symbolic constraints on sexed positions – the Camp affectation or citation of them through drag kinging can produce contestatory identifications. Such identifications neither oppose or disavow symbolic constraints, but effectively rearticulate and reinscribe them through a kind of de-sanctification, and a refusal to be confined within or by them. When women embody masculinity, perform as drag kings, or do both, and derive erotic and other pleasures from doing so, they paradoxically identify with symbolic demands and constraints on sexed positions, in order to engage in ‘inverted identifications’ with those same demands and constraints, creating queer pleasures and erotic identifications based in desire, rather than in abjection or failure. As is already apparent, within drag king culture female masculinity does not – refuses to – conform to its symbolic position as the punishment that both threatens and compels the properly constituted feminine sexed position.

Within the symbolic, failure to submit to the feminine position of castration means both the terrible ‘ascent into phallicism’ and the hellish descent into the role of castrator (Butler 1993, 103). The misogynistic construction and subsequent containment of female masculinity within the symbolic can only attach a negative fate to its embodiment and display, by figuring it as a form of ‘monstrous’ phallicism in which the masculine woman has failed to submit to her symbolic castration and will therefore become the ‘devouring and destructive’ castrator (102). And, as Judith Butler has provocatively proposed, could this monstrous phallicism be figured as a form of homosexual abjection: the ‘phallicised dyke?’ (103). We have already deduced how the heteronormative laws that construct female/feminine subjectivity foreclose the possibility of crossings of identification and desire which might exceed or contest the binary parameters that can only figure a heterosexual femininity, or the excessive phallicism of the masculine woman – the ‘failed’ woman, the ‘dyke’. As previously mentioned and illustrated, in doing so such laws reveal how sexed positions are constructed and established through the exclusion and abjection of a whole range of identificatory and desiring sexed positions. Drag kinging though, contests the ‘phallic dyke’ – the ‘failed’ woman – as a figure of abjection or punishment for not being

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‘properly’ sexed, through the performance, eroticisation and spectator enjoyment of female masculinity. The drag king effectively appropriates and recasts the abject figure of the masculine woman within a female economy of desire to ‘signify in excess of is structurally mandated position’ within governing laws on gender and sexuality (Whatling 1997, 50).

Through her performance and embodiment of female masculinity the drag king takes on attributes said to be dissonant with femininity and femaleness, and it is through her performance, embodiment and eroticisation of that dissonance as a prohibited sexed position, that she signals identification with, and at the same time defies, the heteronormative economies of gender and sexuality that would render such an identification as abject and punishable. By expressing and taking bodily and psychological pleasures from the abject and prohibited sexed position of the ‘masculine-woman’, drag kings re-invent, or invert, female masculinity for themselves and their audiences as powerfully erotic and erotically powerful, contesting the binary that imagines and constructs only a heterosexual femininity, or its alternative, the monstrous and excessive phallicism of the masculine (as failed) woman. The drag king and her audience celebrate and eroticise an ‘excessive figure of phallicism’ by substituting a female figure of desire and power in place of the heterosexist misogynistic construction of female masculinity (Butler 1993, 102). In addition, by playing out and performing cross-identificatory practices and cross-corporeal modes of identification and desire, drag kings and their desiring audiences align themselves with that which is inherently incoherent in respect to symbolic demands to identify within strict binary and hierarchical configurations. That is, those desires and identifications indulge in and derive meaning from queerly contesting and exceeding ‘the defining limits of symbolic exchange’, and that which is foreclosed ‘from the binary figuration of normalised heterosexuality and abjected homosexuality’ (104).

If we consider the diverse identifications with, and subsequent female-embodied appropriations and performances of various masculinities – especially stereotypical or idolised heterosexual masculinities – the varied crossings of identification and desire in drag kinging, along with the bodily and other pleasures derived from doing so, we might see how such embodiments and pleasures increasingly problematise dominant discourses and notions of both (proper and improper) masculinity and femininity, and
by association, heterosexuality. Because gender norms traditionally operate by embodying specific ideals of femininity and masculinity, and these are ‘almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond’ (232), drag king embodiments and erotics operate to specifically ‘queer’ such assumed associations, and also reveal, perform and inhabit what is *supposed* to remain concealed, un-performable and un-inhabitable, or what must be foreclosed in order for ‘normative’ heterosexuality to constitute itself (236).

Female embodiments of masculinity then, along with the crossings of identification and desire that are practised in drag kinging, are embodiments, identifications and desires that *are always already proscribed* within normative heterosexuality; they are not constituted as embodiments, identifications and desires ‘that emerge and subsequently become prohibited’, they are always already prohibited (236). As has been discussed and referred to throughout this chapter, they are and remain ‘disavowed’ embodiments, identifications and desires in relation to the constitution of ‘proper’ gendered identification, and concomitantly, ‘proper’ heterosexual identification; that is, they form a ‘constitutive relationship to heterosexuality’, in as much as those embodiments, identifications and desires are and remain organising figures of abjection (113). Such embodiments, identifications and desires may be theorised then as ‘the impossible within the possible’, the always already there as the disavowed (236).

Whether one’s ‘female masculinity’ is considered ‘essential’, constructed or otherwise, within drag king performances and king culture it becomes a substitute for ‘masculinity’, and so by association, simultaneously displaces and perverts masculinity along with heterosexuality and femininity (Dollimore 1991, 34). The displacements which ‘proper’ masculinity and femininity, and again by association, heterosexuality, constitute themselves by, also constitute, as previously discussed, certain ‘repressive discriminations’, meaning those displacements are always enabled via the *proximity* of that which is disavowed (33). As has been previously demonstrated in both Dollimore’s and Butler’s discussions on the structures that govern heteronormative gender and sexed identities, inherent in dominant constructions of ‘proper’ sexed positions is the interdependence of the ‘other’, or the repudiated, to the notion of the (proper) ‘self’, a relationship paradoxically founded on an exclusion, or a series of exclusions, which are simultaneously a presence. This interdependence is queerly and perversely exploited by
drag kings to create the dynamic of female masculinity’s ‘proximity’ to conventional and dominant structures of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality, and the subsequent undermining of the parameters that those structures must continually operate through. By engaging with, performing, and embodying the ‘disavowed’ other(s), drag kings both ‘expose’ – as ‘abjecting strategies’ – and mime the conventions and terms by which heteronormative and symbolic laws structure themselves by (Butler 1993, 232).

By queerly engaging with those structures as the ‘disavowed’ who accede to those structures only to purposely and purposefully pervert them, and who consequently refuse to be contained by them, it could be argued that drag king promotions and celebrations of female masculinity pose a potential ‘threat’ to those structures by signifying in excess of them, a decidedly Camp, but female specific manoeuvre that mobilises queer female desires, and lends ‘corporeal legibility’ and legitimacy to female masculinity (234). And again, it is within the very dynamics that are generated by female masculinity’s Camp relationship to those structures that many of the associated and accompanying erotic and other pleasures of drag kinging are realised and made meaningful.

The interdependent relationship between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, or perhaps more appropriately, the relationship with what must be repudiated in order for ‘proper’ gendered and heterosexual identification and desire to emerge (in this case that ‘other’ always being the masculine woman, the ‘others’ always being those cross-corporeal and identificatory modes of being and practices that are necessarily foreclosed) is a complicit one in drag kinging. In order to derive pleasure from performing and embodying female masculinity, from engaging in cross-identificatory practices, or even admiring and desiring drag kings, those relationships must first be acknowledged and deployed in some conscious sense before they can be perversely entertained and queerly exploited. And of course, in conjunction with this is female masculinity’s and drag kinging’s exclusion of ‘proper’ femininity and ‘proper’ heterosexual identification. That exclusion is, paradoxically, a perverse presence that enhances the pleasures bodily and otherwise of performing and being admired in masculine drag, and this is clearly born out in the first hand narratives I have included in this chapter. More specifically, many of these pleasures – as perversely paradoxical, as specifically Camp – both arise out of and challenge those dominant and prevailing structures that continue to govern or
exercise control over women’s lives, the ways we might wish to identify, and the ways that we might choose, celebrate and embody our sexuality and desires.
4. **DRAGGRESSIVE REINSCRIPTION IN THE CAMP:**

THE ‘OUTLAW TURNS UP AS IN-LAW’

Throughout the previous chapter I discussed drag kinging’s various dynamics as being evoked through a type of *proximity* to heteronormative laws and structures of gender and sexuality, rather than as an outright opposition to them. I borrow that term from Jonathon Dollimore’s account of proximity which follows below. Further, I employ his account of proximity to speculate on the dynamics of drag kinging and drag king culture. In addition, I take it to mean several things, including the suggestion that the ‘meaningfulness’ of drag king performances and practices, and female em-bodied masculinity, is produced at the level of re-inscriptions from *within* those dominant structures that would seek to simultaneously prescribe and proscribe them. Further, those re-inscriptions represent both a threat and a challenge to the supposed internal stability of those structures as ‘norms’ by signifying in excess of them. The erotic and other pleasures taken from that re-inscription are themselves a product of certain ‘insurrectionary desires’ that *also* emerge from the ‘selfsame conformist orders’ that censure them (Butler 1993, 228). And in turn, these effects are related to the ‘perverse’ dynamics – as Camp tactics – that I have been discussing as intrinsic to drag kinging’s efficacy, a type of ‘transgressive agency’ practiced by drag kings that affords them and their audiences the power to control the meanings and value of drag king performances and female masculinities, albeit within the sociocultural and sociosexual context of drag king culture (Dollimore 1991, 33). Additionally, female masculinity, as antithetical to ‘proper’ masculinity, femininity, and by association heterosexuality, is always constructed as the ‘other’, when in fact it signifies interconnectedness. Constructed as antithetical, female masculinity automatically ‘inheres within and is partly produced by’ those constructions of proper masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality (33). More importantly, proximity denotes a temporal or spatial relationship, and as Dollimore notes, whilst it is the construction of the proximate as the ‘other’ that facilitates displacement, the proximate ‘is also what enables a tracking-back of the ‘other’ into the ‘same’’ (33). The ‘other’ then, is never far away.

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In drag kinging the eroticisation of female masculinity and the performance and embodiment of ‘masculinity’ through and on female bodies, whilst remaining ‘forbidden’ by society, is effectively (re)instated through and within that society’s most cherished and central cultural beliefs and structures of subjectivity. For instance, ‘proper’, ‘autonomous’, and ‘natural’ gendered and sexed identifications, and their corollary, ‘improper’, ‘inauthentic’, and ‘unnatural’ gendered and sexed identifications (Dollimore 1991, 15). As s/he appropriates those structures, the drag king and the masculine woman simultaneously erode or ‘transvalue’ them through perverting and ‘queering’ them. Both signify the exclusions by which dominant culture ‘knows’ and structures itself. For instance, the masculine woman – an ‘abnormality’ – ‘is not just the opposite, but the necessarily present antithesis’ of the feminine woman – ‘normality’ (15). Further, both perversely occupy and eroticise those positions, which by their nature are, according to that same culture, perverse and transgressive, but which that selfsame culture partly structures itself through and against (15).

Such queer or Camp appropriations – informed by what Dollimore would identify as a ‘transgressive aesthetic’ – in the name of desire and identification remain paradoxically perverse (Dollimore 1991, 309). However, those appropriations act (not always intentionally) as a reaction to and disruption of those categories and laws of gendered and sexed subjectivity that continue to (prescribe and then) proscribe such desires and identifications (309). Effectively, such appropriations, desires, and identifications can be seen as both developing out of dominant structures of subjectivity and identification, and as the motive behind the development of what could be labelled a ‘defensive’ strategy of resisting constructions and conceptions of transgressive subjectivity as somehow ‘outside’ of or uniformed by ‘the very culture it transgresses’ (11).

Throughout preceding chapters I have perhaps unwittingly granted drag kinging, its various dynamics, and female masculinity too much oppositional or transcendental significance. In addition to championing them as specifically Camp practices, I have also been considering their cultural negation or ‘impossibility’ being in direct proportion to their symbolic centrality: This is with regards to them being ‘strangely integral’ to the norms, laws and constructions of subjectivity and identification that (must) continually displace, contain or otherwise ‘exclude’ them (28). Whilst the diverse and perverse strategies that drag kings and masculine women engage in to
define, perform, embody and (re)territorialise female masculinities generates internal instabilities within those norms, laws and constructions, they also continue to highlight interconnectedness with them. Rather than an overtly oppositional or strict ‘outsider’ relationship to them, this interconnectedness highlights what must be continually displaced and excluded in those norms, laws and constructions. Any excluded or ‘impossible’ identity is in fact always incorporated, is always ‘adjacent’ as the proximate, and therefore remains inseparable from, and in part, intrinsic to, the social and cultural construction of subjectivity (33).

Dollimore taxonimises such strategies within terms of a ‘transgressive reinscription’, which is regarded as ‘the return of the repressed and/or the suppressed and/or the displaced via the proximate’ (33). He writes:

… reinscription denotes an anti-essentialist, transgressive agency which might intensify those instabilities, turning them against the norms. It becomes a kind of transgression enabled rather than thwarted by the knowledge that there is no freedom outside history, no freedom within deluded notions of autonomous selfhood (33).

Through their performance and celebration of female masculinity, along with any erotic gratification, drag kings challenge dominant heterosexual constructions of gender and sexuality and bourgeois notions of identity. Drag kings employ those constructions as the point from which to both (mis)identify and name their female masculinity and queer subjectivity and desires, and also the point from which to transgress and signify in excess of them. Female masculinity may also threaten the psychic and social boundaries those constructions seek to uphold through their simultaneous containment and exclusion of the ‘other’, by its proximity as the ‘disavowed’ that inheres within. The paradoxically perverse nature of these particular dynamics highlights how female masculinity (and queer subjectivity) is both constituted and constitutive: constituted (but not determined) by and within dominant and prevailing heterosexual constructions of gender and sexuality, and bourgeois notions of identity, and partly constitutive of them (280).

The masculine woman then, is both product of and produced by those constructions and notions of identity, and its potentially transgressive agent. Not only does she reveal that (traditionally) identity is ‘essentially informed by what it is not’, but that the prevailing
metaphysical construction of subjectivity ‘is at once an admission and production of its disruptive potential, a disruption in and of the very terms of its construction’ (282 my emphasis). As Dollimore demonstrates, identity is largely constituted by structures of power, position, and allegiance to the order of society. Any disruption or disobedience to that order is inevitably seen as a failure, as deviate and transgressive, and therefore, destructive of the established order and its obedient agents (282). This contradicts more traditional metaphysical constructions of identity, which are structured on the idea of the individual as unified and autonomous. Clearly, the two ideals cannot be reconciled, and Dollimore’s assertion that identity is informed by what it is not holds true. Further, it also suggests, paradoxically ‘that the less autonomous individuality is thought to be, the more it might be marked by a potentially subversive agency’ (283).

The masculine woman doesn’t especially seek to decentre prevailing or dominant concepts of human subjectivity or identity – gendered or otherwise – or escape them through some kind of imaginary transcendence, but rather ‘appropriate[s] what is there’ in order to move beyond, or perhaps more correctly, queerly read into, perform and embody, what isn’t (supposed to be) there (Whatling 1997, 5). In particular, the masculine woman negotiates the contradictions of human subjectivity – or more specifically female/feminine subjectivity – and purposely and queerly (re)fashions herself as powerful and desirable, a ‘weapon’ against an identity that is supposed to be culturally impossible, but in reality is ‘inherited’ by her and others as a deviant and abject gender and, by association, sexual identity. By signifying in excess of her mandated position as an abject, undesirable and deviant identity, but doing so through the Camp affectation and perverse rearticulation of that very position, the masculine woman not only re/imagines, lives out, and derives pleasures from her queer desires for female masculinity and her embodiment of that masculinity, but also invades and subverts her ‘inherited’ oppressive identity (Dollimore 1991, 311).

In addition, by queerly reappropriating, subverting, and taking perverse pleasure from her position as the ‘antithetical’ – the disavowed – that inheres within, the masculine woman refuses to be ‘elsewhere’, refuses to be the culturally marginalised and impossible, and is ‘at once excessively and obviously there’ (29). At the same time, as a result of female masculinity’s ‘paradoxical, incoherent construction’, the masculine woman eludes complete identification, and thus represents and revels in the
contradictions and instabilities within dominant laws and constructions of female/feminine subjectivity (31). Through her ‘inappropriate imitation’ of the laws that are paradoxically responsible for her impossible identity in the first place, her subsequent display of gender as both artifice and pose and embodied desire, and her pleasure and delight in simultaneously being subjected to those laws only to displace them through inappropriate imitation, the masculine woman reveals her female masculinity as, in the words of Homi Bhabha, ‘at once resemblance and menace’ (Bhabha 1997, 154). The masculine woman and the drag king extricate themselves from the ‘shadowy margins’ to a centre, from the constructed place of the culturally impossible – the proscribed, but nonetheless prescribed identity – to a presence, ‘but a presence still in terms of, or working in terms of’ that construction (Dollimore 1991, 227). What emerges may be incipient, but it is challenging because that construction has ‘created, become dependent upon (and) incorporated’ the ‘abject’ masculine woman along with all its abject ‘others’. They are and remain the disavowed that inheres within – the culturally marginalised that remain, paradoxically, so culturally significant (227).

Again, and in another queer twist, the perverse dynamics that inform and make meaningful much of female em/bodied masculinity perversely promotes a connection between dominant laws on and constructions of female/feminine subjectivity, and drag king reinscriptions of those laws in the name of queer female desires, a connection which by definition should be fundamentally impossible, or at least opposed. Yet, this ‘conflict’ makes such reinscriptions possible and meaningful – and indeed challenging – precisely because those reinscriptions are produced within and through a type of ‘radical interconnectedness’ between those laws and constructions, and queer female desires (230). In this sense then, those reinscriptions are both against, for want of a better term, and within those laws and constructions, and can perhaps be seen as perverse imitations – a type of menacing mimicry – of them, at the same time that such imitations challenge the authority and stability of those laws and constructions (Bhabha 1997, 158).

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24 Bhabha is referring to the ambivalent relationship between coloniser and colonised rather than any reference to gender and sexuality. I have borrowed from Bhabha because his views on that relationship can be applied to the relationship between female masculinity and the laws that govern gender and sexuality.
Could we not assume then, that dominant or heterosexual constructions and discourses on female/feminine subjectivity remain vulnerable to their ‘marginalised’ – their deviants – because that subjectivity ‘is partly created and partly defined in opposition to’ (and therefore also through) that which it marginalises, that which is prescribed as ‘deviant’ and therefore must remain ‘outside’? (Dollimore 1991, 225) As Dollimore notes, this dialectic suggests that the ‘outside’ may be said ‘to be always already inside’ (225). And in the case of the masculine woman and her celebration and eroticisation of that masculinity, we see a return from abject, demonised other, ‘to challenging presence via containment, and one involving a simultaneous, contradictory, yet equally necessary appropriation and negation’ of those very constructions and discourses of feminine/female subjectivity from which she is always ‘excluded’, but by which she is also (initially) defined (226).

Female masculinity – displayed, embodied, celebrated and eroticised within drag king culture – insinuates itself within, and subsequently disturbs and challenges, the laws and constructions which had/have ‘created’ it (227). Female masculinity is and remains a complex experience and embodied display of female ‘deviance’ as a reinscription from within the dominant structures that continue to order female bodies, sexuality and identity. It remains a (mis)appropriation of those structures in the name of that deviance, and a transgressive desire that is both ‘rooted’ in those structures and ‘the impetus for affirming different/alternative’ female bodies, female sexuality, female identity and female desires (15).

4.1 Neither one nor the ‘Other’.

…conscience … lives but to give rebellion its fascination and disobedience its charm.


I want to further explore female masculinity’s positioning as the ‘fearful’ and threatening ‘proximate’ in order to elaborate on the perverse desires that both inform and exploit that position, together with the erotic and other pleasures taken from it, and revert back to Jonathon Dollimore’s notion of ‘transgressive reinscription’ as especially valuable here (Dollimore 1991, 33). As argued previously, that proximity can be read
as both displacing and transgressing the ‘truths and norms of being’ that circulate throughout our culture and society, particularly the truths and norms that govern female/feminine subjectivity (309). But as an ‘agency of displacement’, perverse desire – inseparable from the dynamic of proximity – is, in part, both constituted by and affirmed by that displacement, and the ‘transgressive aesthetic’ that informs it (309). Just as those truths and norms are put in place to proscribe – that is to render impossible – but also, paradoxically, to prohibit, any perversion or subversion of them, so perverse desire is in turn made possible, and thus qualified, through and within this paradox.

Perverse desire is in fact both a product of and produced at the level of a reinscription from within those truths and norms that proscribe (through prescribing) certain desires as ‘perverse’. In effect, perverse desire’s longing and ability to challenge and displace the ‘truths and norms’ that govern subjectivity is always done from ‘within’, because it is always already and has always been ‘within’. Perverse desire is, by its very nature, produced and realised from ‘within’, and often through a series of displacements.

Naming or embodying perverse desire as ‘perverse’ remains a dynamic and complex process that is often contradictory. Transgressive reinscriptions practised in the name of perverse desire may (perhaps unconsciously) presuppose – take as fact – that which they would seek to challenge and displace, and in so doing be considered nothing other than ascription to them. For instance, in both appropriating and eroticising the position of the culturally abject and impossible figure of female/feminine masculinity, it could be said that drag kings, and to an extent their audiences, are both mocking and contradicting that which they are ‘imitating’ and eroticising. I say ‘mocking’, because in identifying with and inhabiting that female masculinity, drag kings and their audiences may be said to be simply reiterating ‘publicly acceptable’ signs and myths of female masculinity, which also, paradoxically, condemn that masculinity. And I say ‘contradicting’, because reiteration may also be partly driven by the desire for the signs and myths that that reiteration seemingly mocks (Dollimore 1991, 216). However, whilst this mocking might appear to simply legitimate – take as ‘true’ – dominant discourses and constructions of the masculine woman, it might also be seen as a type of perverse inversion, whereby masculine women, and those who desire them, take pleasure from mocking the very cultural signs and myths that have defined what female masculinity and the masculine woman ‘is’ (and isn’t). Inherent to that enjoyment is the re-emergence of those very signs and myths from within queer female desire, and the
simultaneous displacement of the ‘truths’ behind those signs and myths in the name of that desire. This dynamic can be seen as a kind of ‘overlap’ of what heterosexual constructions and symbolic laws simultaneously deny, but must also render illicit, and what drag king reinscriptions seek to embody, make visible, and render legitimate, powerful and erotic. That is, the queer female desires that elevate female masculinity to the legitimate, powerful and erotic, perhaps derive in part from what denies those desires and what those desires might challenge – the masculine woman as culturally ‘impossible’, but who is, ironically, constructed and then defined as repugnant and undesirable (215).

The perverse pleasures of female masculinity, erotic and otherwise, are partly realised then through a complex negotiation with particular cultural signs and myths – the ‘impossible’ masculine woman, the ‘monstrous’, devouring, phallic woman – which are based upon what can only be described as a type of homophobia and heterosexual fear. So, within drag king culture, what may inspire identification with the signs and myths of female masculinity is the appeal of ‘disobeying’ – of perversely trespassing upon – the dominant representations, constructions and definitions of female masculinity, through simultaneously (mis)appropriating them in the name of queer female desires. It is precisely in making visible and eroticising that which shouldn’t be made visible, and certainly shouldn’t be available for eroticisation – shouldn’t be available to women at all – that drag kings and their audiences can, through a series of negotiations, displace the familiar and dominant signs and myths of female masculinity, whilst embracing their desires for the same. It is their desire – as queer desire – that challenges, or introduces different meaning to the signs and myths of female masculinity. Further, it is the eroticising of female masculinity, as an inherently sexual enterprise, that also perversely plays with and ‘wrecks’ what those signs and myths construct in order to structure feminine subjectivity and sexuality: that female masculinity is at once both a rampant, deviant, crude and monstrous sexual identity, and one that is completely devoid of any sexual identity, sexuality, sensuousness and eroticism. The affectation, embodiment, and eroticisation of the signs and myths of female masculinity from within desire are the product of a simultaneous ‘faithful’ execution and ‘queer’ re-execution of them. Although this ‘position’ would seem fundamentally conflicting, in that it is opposed yet oddly (and necessarily) interrelated, it remains one position – albeit
ambivalent – through which drag kings and their audiences may experience and perpetuate their desires for and around female masculinity.

In a similar vein, part of Leo Bersani’s discussion of gay male desire and its mostly pervasive commitment to certain heterosexual constructions of masculinity parallels the above argument. It is included here as a kind of introduction into how complex and contradictory queer desire can be. There is a certain irony, or paradox, in identifying with and desiring that which would also condemn; and as Bersani notes, within the logic of male homosexual desire is the fact that it ‘includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man’s enemies’ (Bersani 1987, 208). The ‘object of desire’, in this case male ‘machismo’, is in part both oppressive and constitutive of male homosexual desire. In both identifying with and ‘struggling against’ heterosexist definitions of ‘maleness and of homosexuality as they are reiterated and imposed’ through dominant discourses and constructions, lies the paradox of being seduced by and reflecting those very same definitions on gay male bodies and within gay male culture (209). In defence of this seemingly inevitable dynamic of paradoxical desire, is the assertion that sexual desire is never ‘a kind of culturally neutral attraction’, and in the case of gay men, Bersani writes that in desiring the male body, the ‘object of desire necessarily includes a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man’ (208-9).

For Bersani, the gay man inevitably internalises ‘what it means to be a man’ in conjunction with internalising cultural constructions that say he is an ‘improper’ one; that he is an inferior – read ‘feminised’ – man. Although this suggests that an authentic and ideal gay male identity should include a simultaneous struggle against heterosexist discourses of homosexuality and a rejection of homosexual constructions of what constitutes a desirable male body, Bersani proposes that in taking on the sexist power that ‘defines maleness in most human cultures’, gay men, in their ‘mad identification’ with that power, with that maleness, ‘never cease to feel the appeal of its being violated’ (209). In effect, Bersani is arguing that in appropriating machismo for gay male culture, and as its object of desire, gay men never stop ‘re-presenting the internalised phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice’ (222). I take this to mean that gay men’s relationship to and desire for phallic masculinity is always informed by the knowledge that they are not only ‘assassinating’ it through their ‘inappropriate’ relationship to and
desire for it as homosexual men, but also, more importantly, through their desire for and engagement in anal sex, along with all the discourses of passivity and dis-empowerment that surround this, particularly the idea of the annihilation of the self or ego (222). In ‘madly identifying’ with heterosexual machismo style and behaviour whilst ostensibly dis-empowering it through subjection to and enjoyment from anal sex, gay men can simultaneously feel desire for and perverse eroticisation of masculinity and identify with the ideal of autonomous subjectivity, as they thrill to its sublimation – and ‘violation’ – through anal sex.

It is not my aim to judge either way whether this dynamic is fraught with ideological problems with regards to gay and other political responses to it, and Bersani proffers his own political view when he suggests that through engaging in anal sex – gay men willingly ‘shatter’ the self on the basis that anal sex is associated with powerlessness and ‘loss of control’ (217). Gay men, he argues, advertise ‘the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self’, and in so doing, ‘proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a mode of ascesis’ (222). Whilst I find Bersani’s arguments for gay male anal sex as advancing the decline of the phallic signifier, and as indulging in the willing demise of ‘normalised’ identity thought provoking, I am more interested in linking the dynamics of desire – or the dynamic of desire – that are being played out in some gay male cultures, to the desires being played out in drag king culture, and the negotiations or displacements employed to ‘service’ those desires. In particular, Bersani’s discussions of gay male desire highlight how desire can and will resist politicisation – or political ‘clean-up’ – in the name of its own ‘project’, and is not necessarily a ‘reflection or expression of politics’ – although it may certainly generate politics (208).

For instance, conflating the eroticisation of macho style masculinity in a ‘blatantly homosexual context’ with an immediate subversion of straight male masculinity and sexuality, denies the ‘totally nonsubversive intentions’ of gay men’s desire and admiration for that particular style of masculinity (207). Suggesting that there is some sort of ‘political expression’ in both desiring and reflecting machismo in gay male culture completely overshadows the extent to which it merely incites sexual excitement and erotic identification. It is perhaps, as Bersani suggests, more correct to say that gay

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25 I take ‘aclesis’ in this context to be defined as a form of rigorous self-denial.
male machismo is a ‘perversion rather than a subversion of real maleness’, but that ‘perversion’ is not necessarily a conscious political ‘act’, and indeed, almost certainly never sets itself up to be perceived that way (208). The ‘gay macho style’ as Bersani suggests, is intended to excite gay men sexually, and ‘if licking someone’s boots turns you (and him) on, neither of you is making a statement subversive of macho masculinity’ (208).

Bersani’s frank discussions of gay male desire also highlight the ‘mobility’ of desire, and how it can be a product of displacement – for instance, where ‘original’ discourses and constructions of heterosexual ‘machismo’, as the ‘object’ of desire for some gay men, gets ‘lost’ in the images, sensations and seductive responses it generates within certain parts of gay male culture (Bersani 1987, 221). It is not the ‘straight macho’ man that is necessarily being desired or fucked. Rather, it is through their desire for, engagement with and enjoyment of anal sex that gay men may be attempting to destroy – to literally and figuratively ‘fuck over’ – their ‘mad identification’ with and desire for the overt heterosexual masculinity and ideals of subjectivity which also stand to judge them. That judgement not only includes the belief in heterosexual discourse that gay men are not ‘men’, but that anal sex between men – even ‘un-real’ ones – is self-annihilating (think discourses on AIDS alone), and thus goes against all discourses and symbolic laws that state that ‘man’, as an ideally autonomous subject, should not be ‘penetrable’, should not be able to be, or willing to have himself be, ‘shattered’. Through a series of displacements – perverting (not parodying) through homosexual desire for and engagement in anal sex the very heterosexual ‘machismo’ they appear to imitate – the gay men that Bersani writes about both reconcile and indulge their desires, both idealise and eroticise whilst simultaneously brutalising dominant definitions and cultural representations of what it is to ‘be a man’. It is these dominant and pervasive definitions – including heterosexual ‘machismo’ – which are argued by Bersani as being in part both oppressive and constitutive of gay male identity, and as such are internalised and embraced as both their condemner and ‘object of desire’ respectively.

Always subjected to and oppressed through marginalisation as a de-centred and subordinate sexuality, oppression inevitably inheres in gay male identity, and as such gay male identity – in fact, any identity subjected to marginalisation – is experienced within this prescriptive norm, and must also eventually ‘be contested there’ (Dollimore
Dollimore writes that identity for the homosexual ‘is always conflicted: at once ascribed, proscribed and internalized’, and it is within terms of identity that acts of ‘self-hatred, violence and even death have been suffered’, but equally – and paradoxically - concepts of identity have also been fiercely fought for in the name of liberation (326). This is a strangely ambivalent self-identification process to engage with, and as Dollimore notes, it is not surprising that this self-realisation may be ‘bound up with a defiant refusal of self’, and the desire for liberation from self (326). Perhaps through their sexual encounters, gay men simultaneously identify and dis-identify with ideals of masculinity and subjectivity, ‘which, together, may then involve a re-identification’ of the self as a type of self-disidentification – a negation of one’s subjectivity as proscribed and prescribed by heterosexual and bourgeois constructions and as internalised by the homosexual himself (326). Desire and pleasure then, are experienced as at once an effect and refusal of prescriptive discourses and oppression, including self-oppression. Identity and desire are inevitably ‘marked’ by those proscriptions and oppressions yet at the same time may momentarily distance themselves from them through intense sexual encounters, or through, as Bersani suggests, jouissance. But what remains relevant too is the fact that momentarily suspending such discourses and oppressions through intense sexual encounters or within jouissance, inevitably presupposes them. However, this does not necessarily make them any less authentic or legitimate, and as Dollimore also notes, it is in fact the very condition that permits such moments to occur (327).

Through a series of negotiations and displacements, gay men can reconcile the contradictions inherent to their ‘self-oppressive’ identifications with and desires for macho styles of masculinity, and, particularly through anal sex, derive a kind of perverse sexual satisfaction from ‘violating’ not only the ‘power’ of the symbolic phallic male, but the internalised phallic male that is so powerfully desirable and yet is also in part the gay man’s oppressor. Gay male identification with and ‘violation’ of macho styles of masculinity could be considered either an investment or re-investment in those styles, in the service of homosexual desire and sexual pleasure. It could also be seen as a queer or Camp re-articulation against those styles – as they are understood in heterosexist terms – and their allure or appeal. It is a fine line to argue that this identification with or desire for phallic masculinity, and its willing and frenzied sublimation through anal sex, might form the basis of erotic identification and
experience in some gay male culture, yet it highlights how conflicted and complex desire – particularly queer desire – can be. Not only that, it reminds us how queer desire is always embedded with the social, in as much as that desire, even the desire that seeks to momentarily transcend the ‘self’, is always a simultaneous effect and refusal of the social, and in the case of the gay male desire to ‘lose’ the self from an oppressive and self-oppressive identity through engagement in anal sex, is always an effect and refusal of heterosexual constructions of what it is ‘to be a man’.

I do not wish to strictly parallel drag king culture’s identification with the signs and myths of female masculinity with gay male culture’s predominantly ‘mad identification’ with and subsequent ‘violation’ of the signs and myths of masculinity and maleness. However, I do suggest that in appropriating and identifying with those signs and myths, drag king culture may also feel the appeal of them being ‘violated’ through drag king reinscriptions of them. By eroticising and sexualising female masculinity, and deriving erotic and other pleasures through the perverse (mis)appropriation of the signs and myths that seek to represent and control the masculine woman through discourses of her as culturally abject and undesirable, drag kings and their audiences may also re-present the ‘internalised phallic’ – but ‘monstrous’ – woman, ‘as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice’. The masculine woman, and those who desire her, internalise ‘what it is’ to be – to ‘look’, to ‘act’ like – a masculine woman, in conjunction with internalising cultural constructions which declare female masculinity as, variously, culturally impossible, monstrous, excessive, undesirable, asexual, and even repellent. Inevitably, female identification with female masculinity is conflicted.

Female masculinity is something that is proscribed yet always prescribed, and therefore made available as something that could be but should not be identified with, found desirable, or sexualised. Identification, erotic or otherwise, with female masculinity is always going to be conflicted by an inevitable ambivalence. Paraphrasing Dollimore, identity for the masculine woman, and identification with the masculine woman (through desire for her) is at ‘once ascribed, proscribed and internalized’ (Dollimore 1991, 326). Through the simultaneous ‘mocking’, embodiment and eroticisation of female masculinity, drag kings and their audiences may be taking perverse pleasure from ‘sacrificing’ the internalised phallic, monstrous, though ‘loved object of desire’ – the masculine woman, the ‘phallic dyke’. As an experience based in desire and loss, this
‘sacrifice’ means a loss of or refusal of the masculine self, or the desired masculine woman, even as it, paradoxically, affirms those selves. In desiring or embodying female masculinity, drag kings and their audiences both identify with the signs and myths of female masculinity, as they engage with the loss, and strangely, the reaffirmation of those signs and myths through queer appropriation and perversion, or what Dollimore might call transgressive reinscriptions, of them. Inherent to this dynamic is both the becoming of and the usurpation of what those signs and myths proscribe and prescribe respectively. That is, in ‘imitating’ and parodying those signs and myths – as the ‘truth’, or, paradoxically and more precisely, the ‘impossibility’ of female masculinity – drag kings and their audiences can also usurp them as they ‘to all intents and purposes’ become and identify with them (292).

The dynamics at play here suggest drag king culture has both an oddly deferential and contemptuous regard for female masculinity as it is constructed and understood at a cultural level. This relationship to female masculinity remains an ambiguous and ironic one, yet I suggest it is intrinsic to the appropriation and reaffirmation of female masculinity as outlined above, and in this regard could be considered a specifically Camp practice. In addition, it is within such moments of appropriation and reaffirmation that another underlying dynamic of female masculinity surfaces. At once ambivalent and exhilarating, drag king embodiments of and audience desires for female masculinity incite that which society also fears, ‘the perverse … the anti-natural’, and in doing so demonstrates how the ‘normal’ is as ‘parasitic upon the perverse’ for its ‘truths’ as the ‘perverse’ is parasitic upon the ‘normal’ for its perversity (294).

What may be happening in drag king culture is not unlike what Bersani suggests is occurring in some gay male culture; the ‘logic’ inherent in the desire for female masculinity includes the potential for a ‘loving identification’ with that which oppresses it (Bersani 1987, 208). Desire for and identification with female masculinity will never be a ‘culturally neutral’ process; female masculinity as ‘the object of desire’ is inevitably informed by dominant and pervasive definitions of ‘what it means’ to be a masculine woman (209). That is, those definitions inevitably inform identification with and desire for female masculinity at the same time that drag kings and their audiences may wish to ‘assassinate’ such definitions through their inappropriate – read queer – ‘imitation’ and embodiment of, or desire for, them. That ‘assassination’, like the gay
male assassination of ideals of masculinity and subjectivity through sexual encounters, is experienced and must be seen as at once an effect and refusal of proscriptive and oppressive discourses on female masculinity. In both appropriating and identifying with the definitions that oppress them, only to ‘violate’ them through the literal embodiment and eroticisation of them on and by female bodies – through doing, being and sexualising that which shouldn’t exist but can exist – drag kings and their admiring audiences not only challenge the power of those definitions to paradoxically proscribe, yet ‘name’ and represent female masculinity, but through their simultaneous identification with and perverse reinscription of the ‘phallic’ woman, they may simultaneously ‘love’ and desire that which they also inevitably sacrifice through parodic/perverse performance. It is a fine line to straddle, but it parallels this notion of desire, in particular queer desire, as both an effect and refusal of that which would repress or oppress it, and the complex and often contradictory strategies employed in the service of that desire. In an ideal world, what drag kings and their audiences engage in may not necessarily be seen as the complete sacrificing of the masculine woman, or the phallic dyke. Rather, it might also been seen as a taking up of what those dominant signs and myths have constructed of the masculine woman, and making them the ‘starting point’ from which an alternative embodiment and rendering of female masculinity may begin.

4.1.1 Who’s your Woman?

When women embody, perform, and desire female masculinity, they displace and refuse to acquiesce to the misogynist construction that can only attach a negative fate to the possible power of female masculinity, in particular the construction of female masculinity as destructive, excessive and undesirable. As Judith Butler has noted, within heterosexual and symbolic laws on gender, female phallicism is always constructed as much more destructive than masculine phallicism, which ‘implies that there is no other way for women to assume the phallus except in its most killing modalities’ (Butler 1993, 103). Drag kings and their desiring audiences occupy but also seek to transform this discourse of female masculinity, enacting, creating and appreciating female masculinity as erotically powerful and compelling, rather than destructive or powerful in a threatening and excessive way. That discourse becomes not only a ‘site of resistance’ for the masculine woman and those who desire her then, but
through its Camp re-signification in drag king performances and drag king culture, that discourse also becomes re-deployed to enact ‘a prohibition and degradation against itself’ (231). This re-signification as a positive affirmation of female masculinity creates a different set of values for female masculinity and female phallic power – an affirmation from and through the very discourse which had as its original and final goal the suppression of such an affirmation (231).

What drag king performances and embodiments of female masculinity offer is not necessarily a parody of the signs and myths of female masculinity then, but rather the desire for and enacting of that which heterosexual culture seeks to suppress, but which it also seeks to ‘order’ or ‘authenticate’ through its own signs and myths. In effect, drag king performances and embodiments of female masculinity, as transgressive reinscriptions – as Camp enactments – are grounded in the perversion of those signs and myths as much as they are simultaneously engaged with them to re-present the embodiment and desirability of masculinity in and through female bodies. In this sense then, the queer desires circulating around female masculinity presuppose the signs and myths of the masculine woman and the phallic dyke, but as stated previously, these are the very conditions that allow such re-inscriptions and enactments to occur and have meaning. The queer or Camp manoeuvres engaged with in drag king culture to legitimate female masculinity are, paradoxically, but necessarily, initially instances or citations of the very homophobic and heterosexist discourses that interpellate that very same female masculinity into public discourse (232). But as Butler suggests, that paradox also shows ‘great promise’, for the subject may cite those very discourses as a discursive and performative basis for an opposition, meaning that although such citations may ‘mime’ the conventions of those discourses, they also simultaneously ‘reverses’ them in the name of queer desire (232). The homophobic and heterosexist discourses that render female phallicism abject and undesirable are perversely re-inscribed and re-signified on and through drag king bodies and in drag king culture to both undermine the authority of those discourses to represent and control female masculinity, and to re-present female masculinity as erotically powerful, powerfully erotic, desirable, and, more importantly, legitimate.

It is these ambivalent, contradictory, necessarily improvised, yet strangely decisive positions and moves that bespeak Camp enactments and queer desire. It highlights
again, how such enactments and desires are as much of the social as they are against the social. And with particular reference to identifications with and desires for masculinity, female masculinity emerges as always an effect and refusal of what it means to be a ‘masculine woman’ and indeed, a ‘woman’. To engage with female masculinity as I have been discussing, either through embodiment, performance, or desire for the masculine woman, means to simultaneously identify and dis-identify with prevailing cultural constructions, signs, and myths of female masculinity, and in some ways, even femininity. In turn, and as suggested previously, this involves a ‘re-identification’ as a type of self dis-identification, where one’s female subjectivity, with all its proscriptions and prescriptions, as these are internalised by the self, can be displaced and pleasurably perverted in the name of and through queer praxis, desires and enactments. However, as a specifically Camp process, such identification through dis-identification, perhaps also thought of here as a type of pleasurable ‘social dislocation’ – means that, ironically, ‘one can never be entirely unselfconscious’ of that identification, or the enactments, embodiments and desires that inform or are a product of that identification (Dollimore 1998, 326).

As suggested previously, queer identity is ‘self-reflexive’, in as much as queerness realises that identity is located within a ‘performative nexus’ (Meyer 1994a, 4). Not only that, because Meyer defines queerness as Camp, and Camp as ‘the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity’, there emerges the paradox that the processes of (re)identification through dis-identification that I have been discussing as a specifically Camp practice, can never be ‘executed independently of … self-reflexivity’ (5). The perverse pleasures and desires that emerge from this particular dynamic of re and dis-identification are always a product of and occur from within a queer reflexivity; a queer reflexivity which must recognise that it is precisely the ‘truths and norms’ that govern and inform bodies and subjectivity – with particular reference here to female bodies and subjectivity – which heighten the pleasures of perverting or parodying them. In fact, there would not be any pleasure in perversion and parody if one were not inside of or somehow beholden to the same truths and norms that one seeks to transgress for one’s own or another’s pleasure. In addition, drag king culture, as a context for performing, celebrating and eroticising female masculinity, is also in part dependent upon, and derives its ‘context’ as a specific socio and sociosexual space for the legitimisation of female masculinity, from the very same truths and norms that
would proscribe it; indeed that proscription only serves to incite and inform both the need for a ‘safe’ space for female masculinity to perform itself, and the pleasurably ‘deviant’ nature of female masculinity. As mentioned previously, such truths and norms operate within drag king culture to both, paradoxically, ‘position’ and make meaningful the female masculinity and cross-identificatory practices performed and eroticised, and also provide the impetus for re-inscribing, re-identifying and affirming female masculinity against those truths and norms.

Through identifying with, internalising, desiring, performing or embodying the traditional signs of and cultural myths surrounding female masculinity – especially female masculinity as abject, undesirable and ‘monstrous’ – and eroticising them within the context of drag king culture and queer female desires, drag kings, masculine women and their desiring audiences displace and pervert rather than attempt to transcend or escape those signs and myths. In effect, identification with, and desire for, coexist with parodic and erotic subversion of the signs and myths that represent and surround female masculinity (Dollimore 1991, 321). As one dynamic of perverse desire, the above highlights the conditions for and ambivalent nature of transgressive reinscription. However, as Dollimore succinctly notes, any transgressive displacement of the norms that govern us must be ‘culturally construed as such’ (322). In the process, he argues, ‘the transgression and the norm are both re-presented. And this, far from being a containment (transgression presupposing and thereby ratifying the norm it contravenes), is one condition of the norm’s undoing’ (322). On the other hand, we should also be reminded that transgressive re-inscription also remains a perverse reordering of truths and norms. It involves inverting or ‘queering’ elements of both in order to find pleasure and meaning, and thus always remains intimately connected to them.

As the above analysis indicates, it could be argued that the ‘truths and norms’ being displaced and transgressed in drag king culture are also in part ‘queerly’ affirmed, for without a type of (disobedient) ‘affirmation’ – played out within the Camp context of transgressive reinscription – the dynamic of perverse desire could not exist. This is not to say that perverse desire ultimately qualifies or confirms those ‘truths and norms’. On the contrary, perverse desire both represents and highlights through its displacement of normative ‘truths’ and the ‘nature’ which underpins them, a paradoxical connection to them (309). Dollimore discusses the connection ‘between perversity and paradox’,
when he suggests that perversity is in part created, affirmed, and thus confirmed, when it is constructed as deviating from conventional forms of sexuality (309). He paraphrases Foucault when he writes that sex has ‘become definitive of the truth of our being’, and as such, ‘sexuality in its normative forms constitutes a ‘truth’’, which is in turn inextricably connected ‘with other truths and norms not explicitly sexual’ (309).

Perverse desire and the perverse dynamics that inform it simultaneously confirm and exploit the ‘inextricable connection between the sexual and the (apparently) non-sexual, between sexual perversion and social subversion’, and they do so simply through their paradoxical relation to, but nonetheless threatening deviation, from the normative truths of subjectivity that governs us all (309). And with regards to drag kinging’s celebration and eroticisation of female masculinity, it is, effectively, the truths and norms of being that govern female and feminine subjectivity, which also ‘enable and intensify the rebellion they are supposed to prevent’ (309). The erotic and other pleasures of female masculinity, the re-claiming of female masculinity as powerful and sexy, the affirmation of ‘alternative’ female sexuality, desires, and gendered identifications, remain ‘disruptive’ reactions upon and against heteronormative and symbolic laws and constructions of gendered and sexed subjectivity, even as they remain inseparable from them (16).
5. DRAG KINGING: EMBODIED ACTS AND ACTS OF EMBODIMENT.

The emergence of new body theory should not be dismissed as merely the latest fad in the scholarly fashion industry. Indeed, as philosopher Charles Sheperdson argues, the body ‘must be discussed, because it represents an impasse in the very arrangement of our knowledge’. But precisely as an ‘enigma that poses a conceptual challenge’, it is, he insists, also an ‘epochal matter – a problem that arises from within the history of our thought, as a rupture within that history’ (1999:206).

- in Renée Hoogland

Fact and Fantasy (214)

The following chapter offers speculative investigations and analyses on corporeality and embodiment by employing challenging theoretical considerations and reflections on the same. Particular reference is made to the embodied effects of female masculinity on those women who engage in drag kinging as the forum for expressing and corporealising this masculinity, and this emphasis serves to both initiate and support the various theoretical perspectives I assume throughout this chapter. Additionally, those embodied effects also serve as a potent and provocative example of how and why we need to find alternative, perhaps even controversial, theoretical avenues for exploring how the matter of the body comes to matter in the production of corporeality and embodied subjectivity.

Renee Hoogland writes that any dimension of the body’s becomings ‘can ... be understood as a dynamic set in a specific time/space’, meaning any body’s becoming is by definition a ‘provisional enactment of corporeality’ (Hoogland 2002, 223). This definition confers upon any corporeal production a historicity of its own. ‘Each moment of becoming, including the ongoing process of embodiment itself, will be mediated by the conventions and traditions that structure this historicity; even – or rather especially – if the production actively defies the rules, breaks or destabilizes established structures’ (223). As this chapter will demonstrate and argue, corporeal productions of female masculinity can be – indeed are – mediated through the conventions and traditions that structure and make sense of the process of embodiment, if only as the ‘contexts’ against and through which those productions do indeed defy the rules, break and destabilise those contexts. Further, analysis of the embodiment and embodied effects of female
masculinity challenges established and taken-for-granted discourses of embodiment and corporeality, whilst endeavouring to offer different perspectives on the same. To this end I employ very specific (and specifically employ) theories of the body, embodiment and corporeality that question and debate the continued negation of the matter of the body in any body/self’s ‘mattering’, and which consequently promote how matter/the body creates, constructs or otherwise provokes the emergence of the self’s corpor/reality and its ongoing becomings.

In addition, such theories also challenge and ultimately find wanting the continued preference and deference given to binary relationships and notions of ‘between-ness’, such as nature/culture, mind/body and even material/immaterial divisions, to explain, construct and understand the body, embodiment and corporeality, and instead offer more complex and challenging theoretical ‘rabbit holes’ for us to go down in our quest to theorise the same. My eager willingness to go down such theoretical holes evolved as the direct consequence of personal theoretical frustration; I could not adequately address or give due credence to the powerful bodily effects drag kinging can and does have on the women who engage in its practice, without finding novel, or at least without manipulating established, theoretical paradigms. Finally, it is through a largely experimental but nonetheless equally intentional mode of analysis that I hope to establish and offer a kind of theoretical recognition of the embodied effects of drag kinging that will justify and justifiably acknowledge those effects as specific and powerful modes of embodiment.

As outlined in ‘Attempting Parameters’, drag kinging is the practice of female-to-male ‘cross-dressing’ and performance, and is predominantly practiced by lesbian/dyke and queer-identified women. Drag kinging’s rising popularity amongst these groups has seen many drag king troupes and individuals develop and promote regular drag king events, websites devoted to drag kinging, and even an annual conference devoted solely to drag kinging and female masculinity.  

26 Although the identity label ‘drag king’ has

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26 For instance, the ‘International Drag King Extravaganza’ has been an annual event since 1999. Held in various states of the US (and this year in Vancouver, Canada), it draws drag kings and those interested in drag king culture from all over the US and other countries, including academics delivering papers on drag kinging, workshops on how to ‘do’ male drag, and panel discussions on the politics of drag kinging where everyone is welcome to speak. Visit http://www.idke.info/updates.html for details of present and previous year’s conferences. In addition, there are many drag king websites, too numerous to list here, but for a great example see the Chicago Kings website at www.chicagokings.com and this thesis’s bibliography for others.
evolved to encompass a diverse and complex range of female masculinities, my focus still remains on those female-bodied persons who make masculinity an act in the tradition of drag as a theatrical genre. As also previously discussed in ‘Attempting Parameters’, the tension between the sex of the performer and the gender being performed remains crucial to the effects or dynamics of any drag performance. When speculating on the embodied effects of drag kinging this tension forms a kind of platform on which the exchanges between body, dress, drag king persona and ‘self’ are often addressed and experienced. In particular, it is the female body that is the ‘ground’ on and through which drag kinging is made meaningful as a drag act – both corporeally and socio-culturally. However, my emphasis in this chapter remains largely on the personal corporeal performance and embodied experience of drag kinging, rather than any wider socio-cultural effects of women dressed in male attire or performing traditionally ‘masculine’ attributes. With that said, it must also be emphasised that any corporeal ‘knowledge’ gained through the embodied effects of drag kinging by those women who practice it, is always going to be, in some way, influenced by or interpreted through the prevailing social, cultural and personal meanings and values of that body as a ‘sexed’ body.

The effects of drag kinging are often described by the women who practice it as positive, empowering, affirming, erotic and sexual, and are always, albeit in different ways, discussed as created and secured through bodily performance and corporeal experience. That those effects are often realised and ‘felt’ first and foremost at the corporeal level, suggests that kinging has transformative effects, in as much as participation in drag kinging can provide some women with a differently composed or alternative knowledge of the embodied self, together with a changed or altered sense of corporeality. This led me to speculate and expand upon the idea that drag kinging not only promotes embodiment as an ongoing and changing process of ‘becomings’, but that the matter of the body is capable of re/writing and transforming itself. In particular,

27 For example, Judith Halberstam has created a kind of ‘taxonomy’ of female masculinities within drag king culture itself, ranging from the ‘femme pretender’ to ‘butch realness’ and other female masculinities in between (Female Masculinities, 1998:231-66). Whilst this categorising may be useful for distinguishing between what are perceived as ‘different’ drag king acts, and hence different ideas on what constitutes female masculinities, in this chapter I am more focused on the actual embodied experience of drag kinging for the women who practice it, and so I don’t necessarily distinguish, for instance, between a butch-identified lesbian or a femme-identified lesbian when theorising this. Whilst this may seem problematic because it suggests I may make generalisations, my ethnographic data shows that there are indeed common threads linking individual drag king experiences that led me to propose the idea of drag king embodiment. However, I am also aware that the term drag king may be used by female-to-males and butch-identified women as a self-imposed identity label.
I want to suggest that personal fantasies and desires, along with the signs of and identifications with masculinity that are employed by and circulate within drag king culture, are ‘captured’ through and by the body performing them, creating what I have come to term ‘drag king embodiment’. In that sense, drag king embodiment as a multifaceted corporeal experience takes precedence over and above how it may be negotiated through traditional productions of meaning, although, as I’ve already hinted there may certainly be many different productions of meaning informing and operating through those corporeal responses, particularly the way a person is ‘anchored’ in or otherwise identifies with them. As Renee Hoogland reminds us, one’s embodied existence, one’s sense of the functioning or productiveness of that embodiment, must in some way be linked to the ‘signifying chains’ that construct and sustain any social order (Hoogland 2002, 222). Any ‘mode of becoming’ she writes, ‘is bound to its own ‘system of rules’, not only to the ‘laws of nature’ or ‘physics’, but also sociocultural ones, to the rules of symbolization and signification’ (222). In addition, drag king embodiment is always going to be informed by and made meaningful through particular contextual dynamics, and so it is fair to say that drag king embodiment is nearly always ‘realised’ within the context of individual drag king performances in a drag-king friendly and celebratory space, and in particular a lesbian or queer socio-sexual setting. However, whilst the embodied effects of drag kinging may be understood as fully contextual, contexts do not necessarily give an account of the power those effects are understood to exercise or elicit. Lawrence Grossberg discusses how power can be ‘identified with its place in people’s affective lives’ (Grossberg 1992, 80). Affect, he argues, is not ‘some ineffable experience or a purely subjective feeling. Affect is a plane of effects…. and is closely tied to what we often describe as the ‘feeling’ of life …. [It] operates across all of our senses and experiences.’ (80). Further, by investing in certain things and making them matter, ‘people ‘authorize’ them to speak for them’ (83). More importantly, that authorisation implies power – not only the power to authorise but the power of experience and effect(s). Not only that, it also implies that power is given to that which people invest in. It is the power that is given to the effects of drag kinging, sometimes understood in drag king narratives as the ‘passage from one experiential state of the body to another’, which inspires the speculative nature of this chapter and its focus on drag kinging as embodied acts and acts of embodiment (Grossberg 1992, 80).
Throughout this chapter I include many first hand narratives on the effects of drag kinging for and on the female body from drag kings themselves, for it is these narratives that inspired me to propose drag king embodiment as a specific, dare I say it, ‘female’ bodily mode of becoming and being. Those narratives and my speculative writing, together with direct reference to Karen Barad’s ‘posthumanist’ account of how the matter of the body comes to matter, Warwick and Cavallaro’s discussion of the dress/body relationship, and Vicki Kirby’s writing on corporeality, posits the notion of the body as a ‘creative’ scene of production: where the ‘difference’ between the ‘immaterial’ and the ‘matter’ of the body is difficult to determine; where the body may (re)write and (re)inscribe it/self; where fantasies of and desires for the other, and what is considered other to the body, are incarnated through bodily expression and embodied experience; where the body takes it/self as its own object of creativity and becomes a literal metaphor.

But dressing in drag taught me about posturing myself, and how my body language can determine how people treat me. It’s about owning space. Men tend to spread out more – they put their legs apart, they have their shoulders wide, they relax when they’re in the presence of people. As a girl, at least in my experience, I was conditioned to be very conscious of my space and contain my space and not let my space overflow into other people’s space.

- Kendra Kuliga

*Genderblender* (38)

The body can be a point of departure, a reference point, and, of course, the carnal dimension through which, and on which, experiences may be translated and interpreted. In drag kinging, the body is employed and spoken of as a ‘tactical’ body, even as that body is always and already culturally positioned and constructed by its ‘femaleness’. That is, drag kings speak of and ‘use’ their ‘female’ bodies as always already sexed and cultured bodies in order to simultaneously challenge constructions and discourses of ‘femaleness’ and make meaning out of and interpret the dynamics that arise and are engaged with through the forum of drag kinging. In a kind of confrontation with Iris Young’s phenomenology of feminine body comportment, which sees that comportment – restricted, inhibited, and confined – as a product of woman’s situated-ness in contemporary society, but as a largely unconscious mode of bodily existence, many drag kings, such as Kendra quoted above, deliberately and consciously evoke the restrictions of feminine bodily comportment and femaleness, whilst employing tactics
of traditionally ‘masculine’ bodily performance – unrestricted, uninhibited, free and active – in order to embrace and gain pleasure from their femaleness or female body and as a rebellious refusal to be confined by that femaleness (Young 1990, 141-159).

Sarah writes that after her first experience of drag kinging she saw how it allowed for the taking on of a ‘different more masculine, aggressive, and sex charged attitude, for just a moment, in a culture in which women, and even dykes have been conditioned to avoid doing such things’. Sarah further elaborates when she writes that drag kinging allows her to ‘shift gears…to undo a whole lot of the feminine behavioural tendencies I have learned’. She further writes:

[Doing drag] is pleasurable because it makes me feel sexy…. Good women, proper women, aren’t supposed to feel sexy … if women feel sexy on their own, they don’t need men’s approval to feel good about their appearances, and they don’t need other women’s approval either…. Performing as a [drag] king makes me feel sexier, less afraid, and more adventurous.

Julie writes that ‘Jake’, her drag king persona, is ‘sort of me turned inside out’. She adds, ‘being a tomboy was fine until I was 15 and then I was supposed to stop. I didn’t, and won’t, and doing drag gives me an outlet where being a tomboy is powerful, desirable and transgressive’. Julie further writes:

I do get a lot of pleasure out of wearing sideburns and masculine clothing…. I can wear sideburns and be complemented…. Plus I think I look better with sideburns, they are cute! … Also, I can be expressive in ways that I feel constrained in everyday life…. I have always hated being boxed in because of my gender, and doing drag permits me to bust out of those confines…. If there is a desire for maleness wrapped up in my performance, it is really just the desire to be able to be a masculinely identified woman. I want to be able to do ‘boy things’ and still be recognized as belonging to the group woman.

Julie’s comments suggest that for her drag king embodiment is both an extension of herself, and an avenue for transcending the confines of her ‘femaleness’ as dictated by others. Sile’s comments echo Julie’s somewhat, in that she has always been a masculine-identified woman, but diverge in the respect that drag kinging, ironically,
helps her to both engage with her ‘femaleness’ and challenge her own perceived restrictions of that femaleness. She discusses her experiences of performing in drag:

Lustivious allows Luster to explore his feminine side … masculinity has never really been a fantasy of mine because I think I have always ‘had’ that down pat. For me it was more about trying to cover it up. I had more difficulty in revealing/loving/operating with and within femininity. It left me feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable. Luster’s explorations with Lustivious have allowed me to see myself as a beautiful woman and not as a marauding drag queen.

Further, Sile writes how performing as a drag king and as a drag king doing a drag queen, allows her to ‘negotiate all my parts; it leaves me feeling less trapped by what I am told I should be…. I feel sexier as Luster and surer of myself … and Luster has had a big effect on my own degree of comfort and forwardness around issues of sex’. On identifying her experiences of drag kinging with a sense of personal empowerment, Sile writes:

Yes. It’s like meeting up with a long lost friend. For me it diminishes self-esteem issues. I feel strong and assured. I do not hesitate as much. People make room for you without so much as a word. You are treated with the assumption that you have a brain. Those parts of you that you spend so much time ‘hiding’ are freed.

Drag king Noah Boyz who performs with drag king troupe Disposable Boy Toys, writes that as a woman ‘performing an identity that I shouldn’t have access to, AND [sic] that holds a more powerful place in society, I challenge [the] structures and heteronormative institutions we live within’. In addition, Noah also writes that being a drag king challenges ideas of female identity, and she finds this experience empowering. In a similar way Fiona experiences drag kinging as empowering, writing, ‘it makes me feel more powerful, less vulnerable, more comfortable and I feel like this after I have performed’. She also suggests it both challenges perceptions of femaleness and lesbianism. She writes that being a drag king allows her ‘a certain freedom to act however I want to…it’s like I have a secret double life…. It’s great to have this supposed double part of me’. Fiona adds that dragging gives her ‘a license to be someone else to act out, to have this other part of me…. It also challenges people and
this has an interesting effect on them. Lots of lesbians I know think drag kings are terrible and we are just trying to be men, which we aren’t’. Melanie, as drag king Jake Dangar of the Disposable Boy Toys, believes it is ‘powerful for women/females of any sexuality to simultaneously claim and deconstruct masculinity’ through performing in male drag, asserting that drag kings demonstrate and ‘help people see that gender is not intrinsic to the biology of a person’. Like many of her fellow drag kings, Melanie also finds that drag kinging evokes a sense of female corporeal empowerment. She writes:

I think taking on masculinity allows you to access a type of power and energy that you’ve been told is not available to you as a girl. And, the empowering thing is that when you get off stage and unbind that power doesn’t disappear. It sticks to you and empowers you as a woman.

This sense of empowerment is echoed in the following comments from various drag kings, such as Alana, who writes how drag kinging makes her ‘feel like a fun, sexy, powerful person’, adding that not only does kinging empower her as a sexual subject, but it also gives her the freedom to be ‘overtly sexual, to go as far as exposing parts of my body that I wouldn’t normally’. ‘J’ writes how being in drag gives her ‘more confidence in my appearance and attractiveness…. Kinging makes me feel high, empowered, confident, sexually attractive, and erotically aroused’. Sarah writes how ‘performing as a king … makes me feel sexier, less afraid, and more adventurous’. Dred also writes how doing drag makes her ‘feel powerful, alive, strong, sexy’. Carmel and Andrea comment on the element of attraction ‘of women being so comfortable with their own bodies, yet not inhibited by being sexual with their bodies’, when performing in drag. Jai’s responses support this when she writes that drag makes her feel ‘sexy, horny, wet, confident, happy, open. It makes me feel me, content, real, empowered …’. Melanie also discusses how straight women and dykes are ‘conditioned to not think we look good, to hate our bodies. As dykes we are often told we are not desirable by the straight world’, adding, ‘in general it’s bad form in our society to go around talking about how great you look and feel. But, when in drag, it’s suddenly more okay to say, ‘damn, I look good’, ‘cause [sic] you’re sort of talking about someone else’. Like many drag kings, Debbie, as Max Hollywood of the Chicago Drag Kings, writes that ‘there really isn’t any clear boundary between Max and Debbie … when I dress in drag and call myself Max I am just showing my masculine side more’. She adds:
I have always had a lot of stereotypical ‘male’ characteristics – even when I was a married ‘straight’ woman. I have always enjoyed being masculine and one of the boys. That is always how I felt sexiest when I identified as a straight woman. I always used to love being strong and tough and as ‘male’ as all my guy friends – and then turning around and seducing them with my stereotypical ‘feminine’ qualities. Now as a dyke and a drag king, I still feel sexy and strong dressed as Max, but I don’t try seducing women with those stereotypical ‘feminine’ qualities. Instead, I am just myself – both male and female, while looking a little more male on the outside.

Debbie adds, that although she is performing masculinity when in drag as Max, she is still ‘100% dyke … I like passing as a man to straight people and gay men, but to other lesbians, I want them to know that under the suit and facial hair I am all woman loving woman’.

Many of the above narratives highlight how drag kinging both paradoxically embraces fantasies of transcending the corporeality and historicity of the female body and femininity as it is socially and culturally constructed and disciplined, whilst at the same time perversely engages with those constructions in order to arrive at, experience, and take pleasure from drag king embodiment. The conventions surrounding femaleness then, including but not confined to ‘proper’ feminine body comportment and behaviour, are actively engaged with, and the experience of drag king embodiment still requires, or indeed desires, the evocation of the female body as a specifically gendered and sexual ‘object’ (at both a corporeal and representational level), in order to be meaningful; so, paradoxically, drag kings make their ‘femaleness’ both the focus of their drag king ‘acts’, and their ‘reactions’ to drag kinging and drag king embodiment.

The female body and ‘femaleness’, as conventionally constructed and understood, and as an active, conscious form of corporeal specificity, remain central to the dynamics of drag kinging. And in this sense, drag kings actively claim their femaleness, whilst drag king embodiment may be experienced and understood as a direct contestation of the very parameters and limitations that socio-cultural constructions of femaleness seek to confine or constrain their femaleness within. These modes of engagement and embodied becomings, which directly inform and are the result of drag kinging, do not arise from nowhere then, but are produced through a complex dynamic that, ironically, is structured by and conforms to prevailing sociocultural frameworks and beliefs on
female subjectivity and the female body, as it equally seeks to and succeeds in deviating from them. Paraphrasing Hoogland, any ‘becoming’ here obtains in relation not only to the individual physicality of the female body, but also to the symbolic rules and social conventions that order, mark and ‘know’ that body. Such regulatory frameworks, however, offer possibilities for confirmation and deviation, for conformity as well as innovation, and in this respect act as mediators in the creation and becoming that is drag king embodiment (Hoogland 2002, 222).

Adopting Hoogland’s extrapolation of Deleuze’s ideas on mediation and creation, which proposes that any creation involves mediation, drag king embodiment might be seen as an embodied form of subversion and liberation founded on the paradox of complicity to and rebellion against traditional conventions and discourses surrounding the female body, subjectivity, and embodiment. Such ‘mediators’ then, are not necessarily or inherently liberating, but as Deleuze notes, creation often ‘takes place in choked passages’, and historically the female body has been more bound to and restricted by those structures of symbolisation and signification that seek to know and mark bodies (Deleuze 1990, 129). Drag king embodiment might thus be seen as an innovative form of female embodiment created out of the ‘choked passages’ of those structures, just as it is equally mediated and marked by them. Indeed, and as many first hand narratives suggest, it is precisely the repressive effects of those structures that may prompt or elicit such a mode of corporeal creation and production in the first place, making them, ironically, and in this case, ‘indispensable mediators’ in the realisation of that embodiment (Hoogland 2002, 224).

However, this is not to say that such structures are the only mediators in the creation and production of drag king embodiment, for, of course, the body is equally if not more forceful as a ‘mediator’ in that creation and production. As Hoogland suggestively reminds us, whilst the body is the ‘product of creative innovation, realised in interaction with the very impossibilities that fuel actualization of its infinite possibilities’, the body, in order to keep corporeal production proceeding, is ‘unquestionably bound to be always already envisaging alternative possibilities, forced to look beyond, as it were, the boundaries of existing realities’ (224). Put this way, the body not only has the potential for infinite becomings, but is also and always the carnal dimension through and on which such becomings are created, produced, embodied and realised.
5.1 Not Everything but the Girl

The body is the single place no-one can leave

- E. Jenkins

*Tongue First: Adventures in Physical Culture* (231)

With direct reference to drag kinging, continued emphasis on the body also acknowledges the centrality of that body to the first hand narratives of many drag kings; after all, drag kinging is performed and experienced by a body, a body that remains the ‘fleshy’ substance that creates, feels, and imposes meaning on drag king embodiment: a body – a female body – that is vital to the erotic, sexual, fantastical and other dynamics of drag kinging. This suggests that drag kinging’s various dynamics ‘work’ at the intersection of the corporeal body, the sensing and feeling body, and the sexed and gendered body, the cultured and socialised body, with both being productive of and a product of each other. As Elizabeth Grosz also reminds us, the body is the ‘very ‘stuff’ of subjectivity’ (Grosz 1994, ix). However, it ‘is in no sense naturally or innately psychical, sexual or sexed’, and of course, it is ‘indeterminate and indeterminable outside its social constitution as a body of a particular type’ (60). The body, she writes, is ‘literally written on’ and inscribed by ‘desire and signification at the anatomical, physiological, and neurological levels’ (60). Much like Hoogland, Grosz also suggests that the subject’s sexed body, its self-conception of that body, and the corporeal significance and experiences of that body, result from ‘networks of signification and meaning’; the body becomes immersed in, becomes bound up with, and is intimately connected to the ‘structure of individual and collective fantasies and significations’ that are a product of, and work at the level of, established social and cultural beliefs (55).

Reflections on drag king embodiment, as they are voiced through personal narratives, naturally make comparative connections with these established social and cultural beliefs. The significance of the female body, together with the somatic translation and experience of that body, is always going to be in some way directly linked to the social meanings and value of that body as a ‘sexed’ body. However, this does not mean the experience of drag king embodiment is restricted by such beliefs or meanings. As Grosz also suggests, bodies are the ‘centres of perspective, insight, reflection, desire and agency’ (xi). Although bodies are inscribed in particular ways, such inscriptions are ‘capable of re-inscription, of transformation, are capable of being lived and represented
in quite different terms’ (xiii). Bodies, she suggests, have the ‘ability to extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them’ (xi). Likewise Hoogland, who contends that because a body must quite literally incorporate rather than simply reflect its constantly shifting surroundings, prevailing norms, and variable cultural and social values, it is inherently and infinitely ‘plastic’ (Hoogland 2002, 225) This, she suggests, means the body is necessarily ‘open’ to endless corporeal productions – accepted and not yet existing (225). So, even though the female body, for example, is ‘always already mediated through the social’, the activities and behaviours of that body ‘are neither restricted to nor inevitably restrained by the social’, nor are the activities and behaviours of that body always ‘contained within the signifying practices through which their effects are mediated’ (Wilton 2000, 250).

In light of this, we might speculate that performing as a drag king could mean embodying one’s desires and identifications with masculinity, feeling those desires and identifications at the corporeal level, then materialising and reinterpretting those effects through and in excess of prevailing socio-cultural constraints and constructions of the female body and embodiment. That is, the ‘felt’ effects of embodying female masculinity are likely to be mediated through the particular social meanings, representations, and shared significance of the female body in patriarchal cultures, and there is no reason to assume drag kings would be immune from this. However, such meanings and representations are not so passively incorporated by drag kings that the female body is simply understood and experienced as the effect of these. Rather, they are actively and decisively employed by each individual drag king who then decides on her own particular mode of engagement with, ‘consumption’ of, or disregard for them, when it comes to experiencing, deciphering and embodying her female masculinity.

Drag king embodiment then, cannot simply be defined or interpreted as just a passive-aggressive or reactive response to prevailing constructions, social meanings and representations of the female body. More precisely, drag king embodiment might be seen as a specific type of body/self-formation that results from a productive, rather than passive, engagement with those constructions, meanings and representations. Refigured this way, drag king embodiment should be seen as a form of corporeal ‘invention’ that affects a positive difference from regular, normalised or constrained ways of being (Bray and Colebrook 2001, 58). In this context, it is far more productive to think of and
see drag king embodiment as the production of a ‘being otherwise’, rather than simply a rebellion against or negation of constructions, meanings and representations of the female body (58 my emphasis).

I am not suggesting that drag kings, unlike other women, are somehow above or beyond the socio-cultural constructions and constraints that regulate and mark female bodies; as Grosz reminds us, there is no denying that these have been ‘deeply etched into and lived as part of the body image’ (Grosz 1994, 82). However, at the same time as the embodied effects of drag kinging may be being mediated through such sociocultural systems of belief, they are also being experienced and embodied as moving beyond or in excess of the constraints those systems of belief impose on female bodies and desires – a form of otherness, if you will, that whilst evolving in accordance with those beliefs, as they simultaneously constrain and enable both participation in and the experience of this otherness, also has the potential for radically reinscribing the existing bodily habitus (Hoogland 2002, 226). This notion of a ‘moving beyond or in excess of’ is illustrated in the first-hand narratives of drag kings, especially those that emphasise the ‘surprise’ element of drag king embodiment. Some of those narratives include comments such as, ‘I didn’t expect’, ‘you wonder, where did that come from’, ‘no one recognised me’, ‘my body feels bigger’, or ‘my body feels stronger’, which led me to consider the centrality of the female body to the meanings and effects of drag kinging: that is, the significance at a personal corporeal level, not an essentialist level, of each individual’s female body to drag king embodiment.

In not seeking to make a broad claim, I am willing to suggest that for women who experience drag king embodiment, there may be a kind of pleasurable and simultaneous dispossession and repossession of their bodies through and against the various and prevailing socio-cultural constraints (including those that could be classified as personal constraints) imposed on female bodies and desires; and this, paraphrasing Hoogland, is supported by the suggestion that active utilisation of available sociocultural scripts – in this case the constraints that seek to dictate female corporeality – may in fact allow individual female bodies/subjects to imag(in)e, convert, and recognise themselves as something radically ‘otherwise’, even though ostensibly through the ‘same’ body/self (227).
Through their experience of drag king embodiment, women both actively recall and embody those constraints in order that the surprising, different, and new body ‘boundaries’ or bodily habitus they simultaneously experience and corporealise as a result of this dynamic, come to matter, in both senses of the word. Whilst not claiming to know just how those constraints are personally embodied by each individual, I am suggesting that drag king embodiment is an individual and specific, albeit usually temporary and contextual, gendered and sexual mode of expression and ‘being-in-the-world’, which affords both a celebration of the female body, and an embodied refusal to be constrained or contained by that body, as culture so often dictates women should. In this instance, it is the female body, as a culturally ‘marked’ and lived body that becomes the ‘norm’, though never a liability, against and through which drag king embodiment is envisaged, experienced and made meaningful as a form of differential embodiment. It is not, as drag king Mr Big writes, about ‘being a man’, or, correspondingly, about refusing one’s ‘femaleness’; it is, more often than not, initially about embodying and expressing the female body’s/self’s desires for and identifications with masculinity – whatever that means for the individual – leading to knowledge and acknowledgement of an embodied self that has been somehow ‘changed’ by the experience of engaging with those desires and identifications.

Drag king embodiment is not necessarily made meaningful for the subject through its comparison with, challenge to, or imitation of male bodies, which have implicitly or explicitly been taken as the norm or neutral subject against which all else is judged or valued, or through the rejection of one’s ‘femaleness’. Rather, it is made meaningful as a specifically female performance and experience, which operates through a dynamic whereby the sex/gender category of female is invested with each individual’s personal understanding, experience and embodiment of that category. To this end, individually understood and embodied constructions and discourses of the female body are employed as context-specific and purpose-specific categories that inform and act as enabling forces to affect drag king embodiment, but do not necessarily determine it (Hale 1997, 233). Drag king embodiment as both an individual and particular configuration of the body – as always a process of becoming – can only be ‘determined’ by way of it as a dynamic ‘hovering’ above the borders of sociocultural and self-established modes of being and accepted bodily boundaries, and as yet non-existent or phantasmatically constructed modes and dimensions of being and bodily boundaries (Hoogland 2002, 227). Further, and more importantly, the female body is never
experienced or discussed as a ‘lack’ in need of supplementation or transformation. Rather, drag king embodiment can be seen as directly challenging those discourses and constructions that continue to discipline, regulate and normalise the female body, embodied subjectivity, and notions of embodiment.

Although the dynamics inherent to drag king embodiment may suggest a kind of hierarchy or distinction is set up between notions of one’s ‘previous’ female body and ‘the body’ experienced through drag king embodiment, drag king narratives continue to complicate this assumption. Drag king embodiment is not simply the result of engaging in a role or performance, nor is it about a performance which imagines an ‘I’ functioning between or somehow outside of one’s drag king persona and the experience of performing as a drag king, and the following quotations taken from personal correspondence with various drag kings support this:

It’s not just about putting on a suit anymore; it’s about becoming a part of the whole outfit. When I’m in drag I’m expressing a whole side of me that needs to be expressed, and it seems like this is the best way.


Flare is my drag king persona and therefore different and separate from Clare, however, I can never truly get away from Flare…yes they are different but they still exist within one entity. Maybe in a sense then they do co-exist and aren’t as separate as I thought … holy double personality!


Jake is definitely separate from Melanie, but there is also a crossover between the two of us (jeez [sic] I sound like I have multiple personality disorder!) As I’ve been doing drag more regularly, I think it’s been a way to create a character out of a lot of my characteristics, desires, a masculinity that I didn’t necessarily want to be a part of Melanie all the time.


Dred is born from Mildred. There are times when one is not as ‘visible’ as the other…. Dred is a part of Mildred and one won’t live without the other.

Mildred, Gender-Illusionist DRED, 2001.
The perception and ‘lived-ness’ of drag king embodiment is for many women the somatic expression and translation to oneself and others of desires for and identifications with masculinity, the somatic expression and translation of one’s own female masculinity, and also a somatic claiming of the body and its desires above and beyond the socio-cultural dictates and parameters that endeavour to dictate its limitations, assign it constraints, or normalise it. In this sense, drag king embodiment is not about a ‘former’ self versus a ‘present’ drag king self – that is, one body image versus an/other body image – it is about discovering and experiencing a powerful bodily ‘tool’ for enhancing women’s phenomenological experience of their bodies, affording them an empowering and personally constructed ‘ideal’ or ‘otherwise’ perspective of the self/body that contests prevailing and even previous personal constructions and representations of the female body.

To this end, drag king embodiment should not be imagined as the result of drawing attention to, and then performing in resistance of, those social and personal perspectives of femaleness that constrain or limit female bodies and desires, in order to arrive at ‘an/other’ body; neither should it be thought of as simply a performance that is processed and embodied in opposition to a ‘past’ body – and it is certainly not about trying to be ‘a man’. Drag king embodiment corpor/realises personal female desires for and identifications with masculinity, while at the same time drawing on, negotiating with, and contesting those constructs that dictate what is a ‘normal’ female body, normal female behaviour and normal female desires. In this sense, drag king embodiment remains an interconnected rather than strictly comparative experience, albeit one discussed within complex and sometimes conflicting narratives, and in terms of the ways it resists reducibility to and conceptualisation within any academic analysis. In effect, drag king embodiment remains a very personal and self-directed becoming or point of convergence, a becoming and convergence where the ‘visibility’ of that embodiment is evoked on and through the body, but where previous becomings are incompletely erased and still visible, creating the resistances against and through which the impact, effects and distinctiveness of drag king embodiment is made meaningful for the individual.
5.2 The Real Body and the Body that Makes a Real Difference

Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real … performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.

- Karen Barad

Posthumanist Performativity (802)

Although constantly pronouncing the specificity of the female body to drag king embodiment, I don’t wish to get bogged down in essentialist discussions about the ‘female’ body, or to assume the sexed specificity of that body as irreducible, or simply a ‘having’. Rather, as previously acknowledged, the female body is both a sexed body that is a construction, and one that bears cultural constructions. However, I argue for both the ‘materiality’ and ‘constructedness’ of that body as existing simultaneously (Butler 1993, 28-9). I take my cue from Susan Bordo (Bordo 1993, 16) when referring to the materiality of the body, and recognise it in the Foucauldian sense as the ‘direct grip’ (16) that culture has on bodies, but also in a phenomenological sense, as in the body, in relation to its perceived world, is still the ‘instrument’ of the self’s ‘comprehension’ of that world; it is both a ‘objectual’ and phenomenal body (Merleau-Ponty in Grosz, 1994, 100).

It is also important to emphasise the mutual relationship between the ‘world’ and the body’s creation or ‘performance’ and comprehension of it. Karen Barad stresses ‘matter’s’ role in the ‘world’s becoming’ in addition to language and discourse (Barad 2003, 803). Her emphasis towards the performative as a contestation of representationalism’s excessive power, grants material bodies – their practices, actions, doings – agency in determining our ontological beliefs of the world, and further, that the material body itself is always already any ontological domain’s ‘condition of possibility’ (802). The world – our world – is made manifest, becomes, and is embodied through relational dynamics; it is not a ‘thing’ for us, but rather is always ‘becoming’ for us, because there exists the possibility, and at every moment the opportunity, to ‘contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering’
As Barad suggests, we are part of the world in its ongoing becoming, not just in it (Hoogland 2002, 218). In a similar vein, Hoogland also reminds us, through paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, that we are ‘always already bodies-in-the-world’, that we ‘literally enact our embodiedness’ by both interacting with and internalising ‘an endlessly diversifying’ world (Hoogland 2002, 218).

Promoting material bodies as both active participants in and incorporative of the world’s ongoing becoming also serves to support emphasis on the matter of the body and the mattering of bodies as also always ‘becoming’. That is, bodies are not fixed entities, they are not ‘things’, but rather are ‘congealings’ of agency and enactments (Barad 2003, 827). Agency here is not an attribute of the subject, but is a ‘doing’ and ‘being’ simultaneously; there is no separation between doing and being. And how drag king embodiment is materialised and conceptualised by the individual is also how it comes to be – how and what drag king embodiment ‘is’. The emphasis here is on the breakdown of traditional relationships between concepts and materiality, nature and culture, and word and world. In addition, there is an insistence on the ‘materiality of meaning making’, and the dynamic, ongoing and ‘open-ended’ process of the world and matter’s becoming (820-21). By further insisting on the carnality, or ‘matter’ of the body, in addition to the sexed and cultured body, I want to continue to argue for its corporeal significance to the making, meaning and interpretation of the self, for as Tamsin Wilton reminds us, the body is ‘our general medium for having a world’, and quite literally, any sense of ‘self’ or production of ‘selves’ is produced in that ‘having’ (Wilton 2000, 247). This notion of the self or selves being produced in that ‘having’ is also supported by Young’s assertion, borrowed from Merleu-Ponty, that subjectivity be located ‘not in the mind or consciousness, but in the body’ (Young 1990, 147). Equally, however, Hoogland reminds us that the ‘coming-into-being’ of the embodied subject is as much a product of imagination, desire and fantasy as of sense/ual embodied perception, and thus, it should also be acknowledged that embodied-ness is equally an enactment of these as an interaction with them (Hoogland 2002, 218).

That the carnality of the body is generally argued as being ‘bound up’ with signification from the very beginning does not negate the effects of signification on or for the body, or suggest that those effects are not ‘real’ or carnal. Indeed, and as mentioned above, whilst we must literally enact our embodied-ness, we equally are our embodied-ness in
doing so, meaning the materiality of the body then should not be regarded as simply a passive or supplementary guest to the scene of signification (Butler 1993, 29,30). Similarly, the ‘signs’ engaged with and employed by a body in order to literalise and enact its subjectivity, highlight the performative, postured and affected nature of subjectivity as a form of self-objectification, yet at the same time those performances, posturings and affectations make subjectivity ‘real’ by simultaneously making subjectivity ‘an act’, visible, and embodied, and in this sense performing becomes synonymous with a certain lived and felt subjectivity and corporeality. As highlighted in ‘Queer as Camp’, ‘signs’ permit the body/subject to perform itself, and more importantly, to perform is to ‘do’, to ‘be’, to ‘make’ the self, once again acknowledging the circuitous relationship between this doing, being and making to the meaning(s), mattering, and embodiment of the self. Of course I am not suggesting that the ‘actualising’ or materialising of the self is a wholly voluntary affair, but I am maintaining that a subject must make ‘itself be by enacting (its own) objectification’ (Apter 1996, 18). That is, a ‘body’, as an ‘object’, is ‘marked’ and made ‘a subject’ by means of the signs/significations employed to objectify and make it manifest.

Subjectivity then, also functions at the level of embodiment and comes to occupy the status of the ‘real’, in the sense that reference to signs may become temporarily displaced in favour of a specifically embodied/bodily experience and an ‘altered’ corporality; signs may serve as a conduit for crossing over and into the ‘real’ of embodied experience, and for simultaneously ‘outing’ subjectivity(ies) as ‘real’. Embodiment then, is as much a product of subjectivity, in that a sense of embodiment is manifested – is corporalised – through the ‘outing’, the ‘acting out’ of subjectivity, of the ‘self’. The signs employed to construct, represent, and even contain and constrain us, are equally animated through ‘mimetic affect’, pose and performance, and consequently bodily experience and embodiment, as much as subjectivity/the self and one’s sense of embodiment, are real/ised through affecting (and sometimes manipulating) those signs (Apter 1996, 23).

Effectively, the signs that seek to objectify us – make ‘meaning’ of us, or actually ‘make’ us – together with our engagement with them, affect a double meaning that is difficult to separate; that is, those signs’ ‘objectives’ and our ‘subjective’ experience of them remain inseparable when theorising embodiment and subjectivity, especially when it comes to theorising the effects of those signs as subjective/embodied effect. And, in
this case, why would a ‘creating’ of the body, ostensibly through and by signs, be determined as different or separate from the ‘expressing’ of that body? That is, the process(es) of corporeality, or the emergence of corporeality, is a non-hierarchical interaction between, and subsequent embodied ‘organisation’ of, makings and doings. And with respect to drag kinging, the subjective/embodied effects of making/doing or enacting – of acting out/ing – signs of masculinity through the forum of drag kinging, suddenly exceeds the conventions of the traditional discourse which states that masculinity ‘belongs’ or must only belong to men, to become felt, embodied and articulated as female masculinity – as a kind of ‘corporeal performativity’ that produces and is drag king embodiment (Wickman 2003, 48). Effectively, female masculinity – equally a corporeal process and production as a process and production of corporeality – is a making and a doing that produces/is a ‘being’ or a ‘becoming-something’ (Hoogland 2002, 221). However, like any becoming, this is not necessarily determined in advance or a permanent state of being, and once again, is not easily theorised or written off as a mere imitation of or desire for ‘maleness’ (221).

We might see drag king embodiment then as a corporeal expression of the possibility of female masculinity and not as an imitation of ‘maleness’. However, traditionally constructed as an apparently aberrant, and, ironically, both excessive and insufficient form of masculinity, female masculinity also helps to figure and mark the processes by which those signs and discourses of masculinity (and to an extent signs and discourses of ‘femaleness’ and femininity) are socially constructed (Halberstam 1998, 2). As Judith Halberstam has highlighted in the introduction to her book Female Masculinities, dominant socio-cultural constructions of masculinity (white, male and middle-class) have always remained dependent on minority masculinities to sustain their dominance through continually subordinating or otherwise dismissing them (1998:1-19). It makes little sense, then, to examine these men for the contours of masculinity’s social construction; rather she argues masculinity becomes legible as masculinity ‘where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body’ (2). And with particular reference to female masculinities, Halberstam suggests these are continually ‘framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing’ (1). Drag king embodiment, as a corporeal and equally ‘real’ expression of masculinity as that of male masculinity, highlights how masculinity should not be reduced down to the male body, or be confined to the biological, social and cultural
expression of maleness (1). Rather, the theorisation of drag king embodiment challenges
the dominant and prevailing belief that masculinity and maleness form a natural
relationship, whilst also promoting the possibility of female embodied masculinity.

5.2.1 ‘If I build him he will come’

It is vitally important that we understand how matter matters.

- Karen Barad

*Posthumanist Performativity* (803)

That female-embodied masculinity should be regarded as equally ‘real’ as any other
embodied masculinity is obvious, and in light of the preceding arguments should be
acknowledged as such. Despite the suggestion that we literally are or can be those
signs, desires, imaginings, conventions, etcetera that we embody and represent, or
which seek to and do corporeally construct and represent us, I don’t wish to lose sight of
the matter of embodiment with respect to drag king embodiment, and in particular, I
don’t wish to mis/represent the matter of the body as simply a medium of and for the
above. Whilst the forms of materialisation that the body takes, lives and witnesses
through drag king embodiment is obviously important when speculating on the same, it
is equally the material itself that continues to beg attention. Taking an even more body-
centric focus, we could suggest that drag king embodiment might also be theorised as a
materialisation of the body’s ‘materiality’ (one’s physiology for example) and other
‘material forces’ (the social construction and historicity of the female body and
‘femaleness’, or discourses of masculinities for example) actively combining together,
which rightly allows the matter of the body to matter (Barad 2003, 810). In one sense,
this does borrow from the Foucauldian emphasis on discursive practices as directly
connected to the construction and production of the body, but it also promotes the idea
of the materiality of the body itself playing an active role in not only the ‘workings’ of
discursive practices, but as ‘an active factor in further materialisations’ (810). Karen
Barad discusses and challenges the persistent reinscription of matter’s passivity in
accounts that examine the body as always discursively constructed. She argues that to
‘figure matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further
materializations, is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity’ (810). She writes:
How might we understand not only how human bodily contours are constituted through psychic processes but how even the very atoms that make up the biological body come to matter and, more generally, how matter makes itself felt? It is difficult to imagine how psychic and socio-historical forces alone could account for the production of matter. Surely it is the case – even when the focus is restricted to the materiality of ‘human’ bodies – that there are ‘natural’, not merely ‘social’, forces that matter. Indeed, there is a host of material-discursive forces – including ones that get labelled ‘social’, ‘cultural’, ‘psychic’, ‘economic’, ‘natural’, ‘physical’, ‘biological’ … that may be important to particular (entangled) processes of materalization (810).

Inspired by Barad’s discussion, I want to emphasise the active role the body – or the matter of the body – plays in its own production or ‘becomings’ – in ‘re/writing’ and making itself ‘felt’, and here drag king embodiment becomes or is constitutive of drag king corporality. Additionally, Barad’s emphasis on social forces, as material-discursive forces, opens up a ‘space’ where any assessment of drag king embodiment doesn’t have to follow or be defined within a simple cause (for example, masculine clothes, posture, facial hair) and corresponding effects (for example, stronger, bigger, empowered, more sexual) relationship, but promotes their mutual implication (810). Further, Barad’s emphasis on the material-discursive also accounts for all bodies, ‘human’ and ‘non-human’, as differentially constituted only through ‘practices of knowing in being’; that is, Barad develops a relational ontology that can account for and acknowledge the body and materiality ‘in the fullness of their becoming’, whilst accounting for the role ‘we’ play ‘in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming’ (812). In theorising drag king embodiment this insight may also go towards understanding the non-differentiation between the dress and other accoutrements of drag kinging and the embodied or corporeal effects of engaging with them, for it does not ‘fix’ any boundary between human and nonhuman, and allows for the development of a theory and knowledge of drag king embodiment as inclusive of both the material and immaterial. Borrowing from Barad’s theories also provides the opportunity to continue to embrace drag king embodiment as a process, an ongoing process of becoming(s) that figures the body as mattering – again, in both senses of the word. Effectively, Barad’s theoretical concepts permit ‘matter’ – the body – to be as active a participant and agent in that body’s becoming(s) as discursive practices.
Borrowing very specifically and strategically from Barad’s theories, I want to suggest that drag king embodiment can be usefully analogised with her discussion of ‘bodily production’ and ‘phenomena’ as inherently inseparable to the meaning and making of the world. Originating out of her development of a posthumanist materialist framework, which questions the ‘givenness’ of differential categories such as non-human and human, and the investment in ‘word over world’ that underscores Cartesian divisions, Barad argues for their mutual implication, and she illustrates this by challenging our faith in representationalism over and above ‘things’ (806). Following Joseph Rouse (1996), Barad encourages us to question such divisions, in particular the legacy of ‘between-ness’ that pervades much of our thinking, experience and ‘knowing’ of the world, whilst in turn promoting a ‘performative understanding’ that develops out of bodily and material practices (807). In essence, Barad challenges the separation of epistemology from ontology and develops what she terms ‘onto-epistem-ology – the practices of knowing in being’ (829 my emphasis).

‘Knowing’, she argues, ‘cannot be fully claimed as human practices’, and not just ‘because we use nonhuman elements in our practices, but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part’ (829). Knowledge, then, is a mutual causal relationship between ‘knowing’ and ‘being’, and the ‘material configuration of the world’ is an ‘intra-active becoming’, as opposed to an interactive becoming, which ‘presumes the prior existence of independent entities’ (829). Barad argues that we ‘do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are of the world’ (829). I take from Barad’s concept that ‘we’ are of the world a dynamic that suggests no/thing has a predetermined meaning, practices of knowing can not be isolated from being, and so knowing and being as an intra-active experience becomes a way of making meaning, of meaning making, of creating a ‘world’, and there being a mutual form of agency between the two informing this dynamic (829). For instance, there can be no pre-determined outcome and meaning to, or representation of, any experience, and if we take this view of drag kinging and the concomitant bodily effects I’ve come to term drag king embodiment, we can say that performing as a drag king does not come with nor impose some definite outcome or meaning, but rather is a dynamic bodily production or activity that (re)figures the ‘matter’ of the body, seeing the ‘matter’ and the ‘mattering’ of the body as mutable, a continuously ongoing becoming and being.
The matter of the body is not passive then, but is an ‘active ‘agent’ in its ongoing materialization’ (822), and knowledge of the body, the way it matters, cannot be determined simply through concepts of the social as if the material body never played a role in its own production and the way it matters, again, in both senses of the word. Further, any ‘concept’ of the body is determined through the mutual relationship between matter and meaning, and a concept then, Barad argues, is a physical arrangement rather than simply ideational. Further, a concept is always going to be a creation, event or response, and thus is a dynamic event not reducible simply to ‘thought’, as if thinking itself were the body’s ‘other’. That ‘we’ are of the world rather than outside it promotes this materiality of meaning making (820).

With regards to drag king embodiment, this relationship is reflected in the emphasis I give to the indeterminacy and fluctuating nature of the boundaries and causal relationships between the immaterial and the matter of the body, the inseparability of desires and the experience of performing and embodying those desires, for example, and finally, reference to the body as a literal metaphor. That literal metaphor reads as oxymoronic is intentional, for it is meant to highlight and promote this persistent inseparability and indeterminacy between the materiality and meaning(s) of the body, and how matter and meaning, in this case, are mutually evocative of drag king embodiment as a (w)holistic encounter and experience not easily reducible to or defined within binary terms of reference. Before elaborating further on drag king embodiment and how it can be discussed employing elements of Barad’s posthumanist metaphysics, it is important to briefly examine her account, with particular emphasis on her discussion of bodily production and phenomena.

In Barad’s explication, ‘things’ become ‘relations’ and she takes the concept of ‘position’ as phenomena as her example to demonstrate this. Rather than presuming that ‘position’ is a ‘well-defined abstract concept’ or an ‘inherent attribute of independently existing objects’, she argues that it can only be established through its relationship to a ‘fixed frame of reference’ in order to be specified (814). ‘Position’ in Barad’s theoretical model is a physical arrangement, rather than an idea or ‘thing’, and she convincingly argues that it only has meaning ‘when a rigid apparatus with fixed parts is used’; for example, a ruler fixed to a table thereby establishes a ‘fixed frame of
reference for specifying ‘position’” (814). Furthermore, she argues that ‘any measurement of ‘position’ using this apparatus cannot be attributed to some abstract independently existing ‘object’ but rather is a property of the phenomenon – the inseparability of ‘observed object’ and ‘agencies of observation’” (814).

In this account any phenomena produced is always a product of the phenomenon of the inseparability of that relationship, and it becomes definable through relationality – as a ‘causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world and specific material phenomena’ (814). Again, there is an insistence on the materiality of meaning making without privileging any ‘exclusionary practice’ over the other, but rather acknowledgement of them as a mutually constitutive dynamic, or as a relational process. Here, phenomena also mark the inseparability of ‘observer’ and ‘observed’, emphasising how matter and meaning are always mutually articulated; neither, argues Barad, ‘has privileged status in determining the other’ (822).

In referring to and speculating on drag king embodiment within Barad’s account of ‘phenomena’, we could say that drag king embodiment is a product of the inseparability between performance/self/subject and masculine dress/body/object – they are all ‘mutually articulated’ and ‘neither has privileged status in determining the other’, or indeed what comes first; the experience and ‘lived-ness’ of drag king embodiment is a kind of consolidation or coalescing of this relational dynamic, albeit one that acknowledges the variability and volatility of embodiment. And as Barad continues to emphasise, the materiality of meaning making goes beyond what is traditionally understood as the material practices of writing and talking (820). As discussed previously, meaning making is a physical arrangement of doing and being – of doing in being and being in doing – a relational dynamic that does not support or make sense within hierarchical or dualistic assumptions of matter and meaning as separate entities or enterprises. The relationship between the material and meaning is one of ‘mutual entailment’, and neither is ‘articulated/articulable in the absence of the other’ (822). In the case of drag kinging, the meaning of drag king embodiment to the individual is not merely the property of words then, but is an ongoing performance, for want of a better word, of that embodiment; meaning becomes determined and ‘propertied’ as it emerges
by way of and through the body, which in turn makes it intelligible to and a subjective experience for the individual (821).

This is highlighted in the various individual responses to drag kinging I have collected throughout my research, for instance, the experience and meaning(s) of drag king embodiment within a discourse of physical liberation from, but through, the ‘usual’ body (this recalls the ‘palimpsest’ like experience of drag king embodiment). Melanie describes and speaks of her drag king persona ‘Jake Dangar’ as having various personalities. He can be ‘over the top angsty, a really cool Frank Sinatra or a leather daddy’. Whilst Melanie reduces masculinities to images and styles rather than a product of biology or embodiment, she discusses her ‘self’ and her body in (relation to) drag specifically within terms of embodiment. She writes, ‘I’m not small, and when I’m in drag I don’t feel fat, I feel big and powerful’ … strong, sexy, more comfortable in my body’ (my emphasis). For Melanie, a body that is normally considered ‘not small’ and ‘felt’ as ‘fat’ is re-embodied, re-written and re-read as big, powerful, strong and sexy, all at the same time. In effect, Melanie self-creates a differently composed and alternative knowledge of her embodied self in conjunction with an altered or changed corporeality, leading not only to ‘control’ over how her body is felt, projected and ‘actualised’, but also to a more comfortable ‘fit’ in that body. Jen’s responses also echo Mel’s experience, and she writes: ‘First, I’m a bigger sized girl (and) being in drag (as Jay) helps me to not be aware of this … Jay is just a big ‘football player’ looking type boy, he’s never once thought about his thighs! That’s great!’ Drag king ‘Muff E. Oso’ also experiences drag king embodiment as physically liberating, but in the sense that it allows him/her to free the ‘man within’, that is, the man within the woman that is not usually allowed to manifest, permitting him/her to counter identify with his/her ‘moderately feminine’ day to day existence (Koenig 2002, 155). Muff E. Oso writes:

I was a moderately feminine woman with no interest in (doing drag)…. One afternoon I was making moustaches for the boys (Edmonton drag king troupe) and I tried one on to make sure it was the right size, what happened next is what I refer to as my sex change. It was like looking in the mirror and slowly dropping every attachment to my female features…. I created Muff E.Oso that day; he is a tough urban cowboy/trucker with a heart of gold (155).
Drag king embodiment is often the point at which women embrace their own masculinity, ‘discover’ their own masculinity, or get to ‘live out’ personal desires and identifications with masculinities. As previously suggested, those masculinities are first and foremost, discovered, felt and understood through the bodily experience of performing them, which suggests drag king embodiment is both a product of and productive of those masculinities. ‘Doing’ and ‘being’ and subjectively experiencing those masculinities is the same thing; doing and being them ‘is’ each individual’s female masculinity.

More simply for more butch-identified lesbians, drag king embodiment can mean honouring and confirming their butchness; again, this is often in addition to, or against and through, the usual – or ‘common sense’ – experience of their own bodily integrity. Clarissa, as ‘Carlos Las Vegas’, writes that being a drag king is a way of ‘embracing one’s masculinity …drag celebrates and validates my and others’ butchness (and) drag kinging also makes me feel a different type of butch sexiness and confidence from when I’m not in drag. It’s almost surreal’. Del finds that the physical appearance of her drag king body is much more pleasing to her than her ‘own everyday body. It fits my brain better, affording a state of mind that is generally a comfort … (and) I have an elevated sense of self’. Drag king embodiment gives her a ‘feeling of completion as an individual … I think I like the fact that when I do drag other people get to see what I’ve known all along; that I’m as much a guy as anything else…(in drag) I feel I more closely physically represent the composite energies that make up the sum total of me as a person’. Amber also discusses drag kinging as an expression and embodiment of her own masculinity, writing: ‘when I’m in drag I’m expressing a whole side of me that needs to be expressed’. ‘Billy T.’ (Amber’s drag king persona) she writes, ‘is an extension of me’, adding ‘he’s what I would have been if I were born male. But I’m not, so Billy makes up for that…. Billy T. is me and more …. I feel like I’m satisfying a little part of me, my masculine side if you will, that gets neglected too much’. For these and other masculine-identified women, drag king embodiment is more an expression of their own masculinity, or is a bodily ‘avenue’ that actively engages with, as it becomes the agent for, their identifications with that masculinity. As Jenny writes about her drag king persona ‘Jai’:

    Doing drag doesn’t necessarily mean that I am being a man … it is a way of expressing myself and being true to myself…. It makes me feel more secure and more me. When I
am in drag, I am more out going and more confident inside…. Doing drag for me started as a joke and a laugh but it was a vehicle to transgress my gender and change it and use it to what I see as me. So doing drag was a coming out experience … it enables me to be more comfortable with my gender.

Ali’s experience of drag king embodiment parallels this when she writes: ‘I have always been referred to as a ‘soft butch’ (and) kinging allows me to play about with my ‘butch’ side’:

Never having been very feminine and suffering for that in a society which even now has fairly rigid expectations relating to gender, I think that being a drag king enables me to explore aspects of masculinity that I’m not usually able to access…(but) I don’t consider dressing up as a drag king to be becoming a ‘man’. Drag kings are drag kings, not pretend men…. Big Al (Ali’s drag king persona) is just an imaginary character but on the other hand, I think to some extent I explore possibilities concerning what I might have been like had I been born male.

For others, certain masculinities that have particular personal meaning or resonance are performed and articulated through drag king performances. In particular, performing personal fears of masculinity through embodying them often results in a deconstruction and ‘containing’ of those masculinities. In addition, it provokes an understanding of the mutability of the body, and correspondingly, altered or enhanced conceptions of the embodied/self. ‘Pelvis Parsley’ sees her drag king performances as a way to shift not only the boundaries between performance and the supposed ‘reality’ of gender norms, but as a way to overcome her fears of masculinity, including her own masculinity and that of men she has feared. Parsley writes that the embodiment of those masculinities is experienced as ‘my gender’, not something she is ‘acting’. Further, she writes of this embodiment as another gender to embody, another bodily space to inhabit (Koenig 2002, 155). Devon’s experience of drag king embodiment is not dissimilar, although she is clear that for her performing her drag king persona ‘Jake’ is acting. However, being in drag as an unnamed character and experiencing her personal definition of drag king embodiment does sometimes blur this distinction. For instance, Devon writes that her drag king character is ‘a real asshole’, but that ‘it’s fun to live that out and get it out of my system, to be a pig … for me it’s fun because it is me giving myself space to live out that aggressive side of me … (and) I like to move my body in a tougher, more take-up-space sort of way…. For me it is a way to take on my polar opposite for a night’. When
asked to elaborate on how drag kinging makes her feel, and what her bodily experiences of doing drag are, she wrote:

I am very feminine and ‘girly’ most of the time, but I also enjoy being a boy … doing drag gives me the space to take that to an extreme and live it out…. I like to dress up like a tough guy…. My body feels bigger, and I take up more space. I feel stronger in a different way than usual. I always feel strong when I’m myself – Jake’s strength is a different kind of strength. One that is more physical, and less mental. When I’m myself and I walk down the street, I walk tough and my attitude says, ‘don’t even try anything because I’ll kick your ass’, and my king walk is much the same, but it doesn’t even expect to have anything tried. It’s less reactionary, it’s more assumed.

Stacey’s varied bodily experiences of drag kinging are not dissimilar. She writes of the way it ‘creates physical, vocal, and sexual space’ in which she feels ‘freer to move’, adding, ‘I am both protected and enabled by my alter ego’ (Whitmire 2001). In addition, being ‘big breasted’ and not entirely comfortable with this, Stacey has found, ironically, that drag kinging both confirms and alleviates this problem. She writes that whilst drag ‘merely affirms that I find my breasts a hindrance, (it’s) only because I feel very self-satisfied when my breasts are bound to do drag…. Once my breasts are bound, my body is a tremendous tool for my drag character’. For Stacey being ‘out of character’ makes her feel like her breasts ‘are over-prepared for the job of being me’, but being in drag, experiencing drag king embodiment, means they become ‘invisible’ to her, she feels like her body is ‘completely efficient’ and ‘every body part feeds into the physicality of (her drag king persona) Johnny Kat’.

All these experiences of drag king embodiment suggest that the matter of the body, the way it emerges and ‘becomes’ through that embodiment, is also productive of and a product of how it is made meaningful for the subject. Matter and meaning are mutually produced and articulated; meaning is articulated through the body and the body is articulated through how it matters as matter, and each subject’s sense of that embodiment, the way they make sense of it, remains a deeply personal and individual affair.

As a bodily production that emerges through and matters as ‘matter’, drag king embodiment attests to Barad’s refrain that matter is not ‘immutable or passive’, but rather is a ‘substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a
congealing of agency...matter refers to the materiality/materialization of phenomena. (Barad 2003, 822). In other words, the meaning(s) of drag king embodiment is always already an ongoing bodily materialisation of the phenomenon that is drag king embodiment, and the ‘materiality’ of drag king embodiment, the way it matters as matter, is inseparable from and emerges out of that embodiment as phenomenon. (822). It should be clear now that phenomena emerge through entangled processes of materialisation, or what Barad has coined ‘intra-action’ (810). With reference to drag kinging, that intra-action involves specific material configurations of various and individual frames of reference, which in turn determines, makes intelligible, the phenomenon of drag king embodiment. This might include performing and embodying desires and fantasies surrounding masculinity and subsequently one’s ‘own’ female masculinity, as a human form of agency, together with the clothing, facial hair and other accoutrements of drag kinging, as non-human forms of agency, to arrive at the phenomenon that is drag king embodiment (815).

Drag king embodiment, like Barad’s example of ‘position’, does not exist as some/thing with inherent or prescribed boundaries and properties, but is a phenomenon produced through intra-active becomings. It is only through the dynamic structuring relationships outlined above that any of the properties or ‘lived-ness’ of drag king embodiment becomes determined or distinguishable, and any particular embodied knowledge becomes subjectively meaningful (815). In line with Barad, this proposal rejects the metaphysics that ‘takes ‘things’ as ontologically basic entities’ – that is, all things ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ – and also the ‘thingification’ of phenomena, and with regard to the body and materiality, acknowledges them ‘in the fullness of their becoming’ without resorting to any absolutes, such as that of individually determined entities, or to the ‘human’, to embodiment, as either ‘pure cause and effect’ (812-13).

If we continue to think of drag king embodiment like ‘position’ as a ‘specific physical arrangement’ – as an intra-active performativity – rather than an outcome of a definable ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ relationship, we can certainly begin to conceptualise it as phenomena as Barad conceptualises that term. Within this context, drag king embodiment remains the product of the inseparability of matter – human and non-human – and meaning: drag king embodiment entails a set of complex interwoven relations, and it remains indefinable if we attempt to isolate these; it remains difficult to
give priority to either the ‘material’ or meaning/the discursive when any phenomena produced in this relationship are produced through their mutual articulation as a bodily production; drag king embodiment is both productive of and a product of itself as a phenomenon. That is, drag king embodiment as a phenomenon is always and also part of any phenomena – any material effects – it produces (826). Paraphrasing Barad, drag king embodiment is a ‘causal enactment’, whereby the ‘parts’ that make up the phenomenon of drag king embodiment are not separable, but where ‘cause’ expresses itself in affecting and marking the body, which in turn creates and makes matter, in both senses of the word, what we come to term ‘effect’ (824).

5.3 And the Word was made Flesh

Why …has the idea of materiality come to signify that which is irreducible, that which can support construction but cannot, itself, be constructed?

- Anne Fausto-Sterling

_Sexing the Body: How Biologists Construct Human Sexuality_

Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.

- Karen Barad

_Posthumanist Performativity_ (801)

In light of the preceding analysis, which theorised drag king embodiment through Barad’s posthumanist account of how matter comes to matter, along with matter as an active participant in the world’s becoming, the following offers a not dissimilar theoretical avenue for exploring and affirming, once again, the inseparability of matter/materiality and signification/representation. With particular reference given to the body as it matters and the matter of the body as irrevocably intertwined in a relationship of mutual complicity, I want to consider and think of drag kinging itself as a context and performance through which and in which the female body is consciously located, re-inscribed and re-read, whilst also thinking of it as informing and having
tangible effects on the ‘very matter’ of that body, the experiences of that body and the significance that body has to and on the subject (Kirby 1997, 3).

Inspired by Vicki Kirby’s writing on the ‘matter’ of bodies as inextricably intertwined with the ‘signs’ employed to write and represent them, I continue to think about how drag kinging as a particular context surrounding the body that performs it, can also come to inhabit that body, and in so doing not only provide and elicit in the women performing in drag a corporeal or ‘otherwise’ bodily context for confounding the various frameworks which attempt to contain the female body and its desires, but also a powerful corporeal site of resistance to those frameworks (4). In addition, instead of discussing their bodies, their selves, in terms of fragmentation, as if there is a self located ‘outside’ of, or as discrete from the body and the experiences of that body, drag king narratives continue to highlight how body/mind, self/other, public/private, and even biological/social dualisms are questionable, and indeed reductive when it comes to explaining or theorising embodiment, or, once again, as the following discussion of Kirby’s theories of corporeality illustrate, even the notion of discrete bodily boundaries (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 130).

Kirby’s theories of corporeality unfold to reveal the body as both a scene of writing, and as an active participant in the ‘writing’ of that body. What Kirby forces us to think about and question is the supposed integrity of ‘sense’ and meaning, not in ‘reason’ or ‘logic’ versus ‘significance’ or ‘connotation/denotation’, but the supposed integrity between sense/sensuousness/the sensory and meaning/signifier. Like Barad, it seems Kirby wants us to consider that there may be no difference or distance between the real and representation, the material and the immaterial, or, for that matter, the body and the sign that represents it. They are not discrete spheres, they cannot be excluded from each other, and the body as matter and the matter of the body are, finally, irreducible (Kirby 1997, 52). It is important to detail Kirby’s provocative examples of corporeality whilst speculating on any connections her theories may have with drag king embodiment, if only to explicitly highlight the irresolvable tension she creates between nature/culture and mind/body divisions, and the futility of seeking any resolution between them. In the process, Kirby forces us to not only ‘understand the body differently’ (3), but to also consider representation ‘as ‘sensible’ in that biology is not a supplementary ingredient
to be included or excluded’. The body, she movingly reminds us, ‘is more than a mere visitor to the scene of writing: the body is the drama of its own re-markability’ (154).

For Kirby, the Hindu ritual festival of *thaipusam* and the *thaipusam* devotee’s participation in it, provide a powerful example of how a particular cultural context comes to be incorporated by the body performing it, and, simultaneously, informs the very materiality of that body. What fascinates Kirby, is not the explanations that the devotee might make of his ritual actions, but rather ‘what this ritual action has apparently made of him’ (3). The *thaipusam* devotee impales himself with elaborate metal scaffolding: ‘Myriad metal spokes are driven into the skin and organs. The hands may also be pierced and even the tongue immobilized by long spikes thrust through the face, lips, and neck’ (3). What Kirby marvels at is the apparent lack of physical pain and injury to the devotee. As she points out, the effects of such practices would usually cause injury, even death for most of us, but for the *thaipusam* devotee ‘none of these effects is realised’ (3). By outlining the ritual actions and performance of the *thaipusam*, she thinks about how the ‘structural frame, or cultural text’ that is the Hindu festival, and through which the devotee’s body is ‘ciphered and located as ‘being in the world’’, also comes to be incorporated by the body of the devotee (3). The ‘very tissue of his body’ becomes or is the language and text of this particular Hindu ritual and his religious devotion to it (3). The devotee incorporates the cultural and ritual context of *thaipusam* directly through bodily articulation, and appears to suffer no physical injury from it; the *thaipusam* devotee’s body literally confounds the ‘inside/outside’ division, for his body does not function within the constraints of its ‘interior and exterior surfaces’ (3). The ‘very matter of his body’s material constitution’ is informed by, becomes, and is a direct result of his devotion to a particular ritual performance (3).

Whilst drag king embodiment does not involve such extreme bodily articulation, or challenge biological and physical integrity so explicitly, we can draw some parallels with the spectacle of the *thaipusam* devotee. If we imagine the actual *event* of drag kinging – that is, the clothes, accoutrements, desires, fantasies, identifications with masculinity, drag king persona, and so on – as the context and structural frame through and in which the female drag king ciphers and locates her body/self as ‘being in the world’ – then we can begin to see how the event of drag kinging is not discrete from the performance and embodied incorporation of that event; they are always undeniably
linked to/with each other. The event of drag kinging literally informs or constitutes drag king embodiment, as that embodiment literally constitutes the event of drag kinging. Like the *thaipusam* devotee, whose devotion to and literal incorporation of a particular Hindu ritual makes him both the living sign and living embodiment of that ritual, the female drag king *is* the event that she performs as she *embodies* the event she performs. And in this case, drag king embodiment is both informed by and revealing of that event, as it is simultaneously, the literal incorporation and material incarnation of that event.

What I seek to provoke by extrapolating Kirby’s ideas about the ritual performance of the *thaipusam* to examine drag king embodiment, is a way to think of and understand the body – or corporeality – differently, and, again, to disturb oppositional categories such as the nature/culture or mind/body dualisms (2). Far from just recreating the question or acknowledgment of the ‘permeability of the body of nature to the inscriptive penetrations of the writing machine we call culture’ – or, in the case of drag king embodiment specifically, the inscriptive penetrations of objects and concepts considered cultural – and thereby leaving ‘the categories of nature and culture intact’, I agree with Kirby when she suggests something a ‘little more perverse and interesting may be going on’ (4).

Both critical of postmodern approaches to corporeality, which ‘have been shy of matter’, but happily acknowledging she has converted to an ‘appreciation that there is no outside of language’, Kirby teasingly asks: ‘Is it a dumb reading of Michel Foucault … to consider that if discourse constitutes the subject, then matter is constantly rewritten and transformed?’ (4) It is Kirby’s preliminary discussions of the *thaipusam* devotee and her ‘dumb’ question of Foucault, together with my emphasis on the irreducible relationship of the corporeal and discursive body, which continued to make me think about drag kinging not only as a context that can both surround *and* constitute the body performing it, but also as a site where the body becomes and is a powerful instrument of transformation. In addition, such ‘thinking’ also marks acknowledgement of a body that literally thinks literally; to accept that the body is just a passive container or instrument of the mind is to neglect the remarkable and entirely enmeshed way the body ‘speaks’ as much as it is spoken.
As previous individual narratives highlight, drag kinging seems to have such powerful embodied effects on the women who engage in its practice, and although those effects cannot be strictly likened to the *thaipusam* devotee, whose biology functions in resistance to normal bodily boundaries, those effects cannot be ignored or denounced as merely a type of psychosomatic experience, or the narratives employed to think and write those effects as merely disembodied speculations. And here, Kirby’s notion that the ‘discursive’ may not simply be reducible to or an unproblematised category of the social is important, because it allows us to consider that the discursive might also be articulated as and through the body (a concept paralleled by Barad’s explication of the material-discursive), and that this articulation might matter, literally as ‘matter’, to the subject. Not only is this reflected in the *thaipusam* devotee’s bodily articulations, but also in the embodied becomings of the women who engage in drag kinging.

The body of the devotee provides a provocative example of why the question of corporeality cannot be reduced to the nature/culture divide. By employing the *thaipusam* devotee’s bodily expressions and performance as a means to think the body differently, Kirby asks us to consider the possibility that ‘the body of the world is articulate and uncannily thoughtful’ (Kirby 1997, 5). Paraphrasing Kirby, we could think of the body that *becomes* through drag king embodiment as a scene of articulation, as a ‘shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written’, and, once again, promote the idea of the subject taking itself as its own object, whereby what is represented (in drag kinging that is the signs, desires, fantasies, clothes, and accoutrements of masculinity and so on), could be said to rewrite the woman ‘representor’ in a movement of production that disrupts the sequential determination of what comes first, the image or the image-maker (61). As a phenomenon not readily or easily reducible to a cause and effect relationship, this challenges not only the integrity of supposedly autonomous notions of mind and body and, in this case, subject and object, but also the beliefs that the materiality of the body is a ‘rock-solid something’, and always and absolutely qualifies the efficacy of representational practices (61).

As previously discussed, the *thaipusam* devotee’s body quite literally incorporates and *is* the ritual that surrounds him. There is no question of between-ness; the devotee and the ritual are both implicated in each other. There is no difference between the literal – the devotee’s body – and the Hindu ritual as the ‘sign’ that represents and makes sense
of that body (5). Here, ‘matter’ is both literate, in the sense that it writes and is writing, and literate in the sense that ‘matter’ literally matters, because it is the very ‘stuff’ of the devotee’s body that is the ‘text’ of this ritual. Once again, although drag king embodiment does not explicitly entail or produce the extreme bodily articulations of the devotee, whose body does not function within ‘normal’ biological constraints, it does entail a relationship of mutual implication. The drag king incorporates and is the event that surrounds her, both are implicated in each other, and there is no difference between the literal – the drag king body – and the event of drag kinging as, ostensibly, the ‘sign’ that represents and makes sense of that body. Further, drag king embodiment as the literal or material manifestation of the event of drag kinging, (re)writes the body and is a (re)writing by the body, and, therefore, it makes no sense to impose any notion of separability between representation and ‘matter’ to discuss or explain that embodiment. Further, it also highlights the inherently shifting and malleable nature of the body and corporeality. Although this disturbs the ‘grounding’ of the body as ‘solid and fixed’, it does not mean that there isn’t a ground, it simply means that the ground ‘moves and changes’ (61 my emphasis). The body is not unapproachable, nor does it lack ‘substance’ then, and thinking within these terms of grounded-ness enables us to, once again, think the body as volatile and mutable.

In another powerful example that also provides an avenue for thinking corporeality differently, and disturbing the nature/culture, mind/body dualisms, Kirby discusses the hysteria patients of the Parisian nineteenth-century physician Charcot. The ability of Charcot’s patients to incorporate and perform, quite literally, through and on their bodies the mortal ‘signs’ of disease, inspires Kirby to think again about the permeability of matter to culture and the inherent ‘transformational plasticity’ of both (56). In this instance, materiality – ‘the tissue of the body’ – becomes and is a type of ‘writing’ that means far more than the ‘familiar meaning of the word’. ‘For what is writing’, asks Kirby, ‘when it is more than writing’, where writing ‘is everything, when there is no getting outside of this ubiquitous text?’ (56)

It is the hysteric’s body that is itself ‘a scene of writing’, where symptoms of ‘today’s smallpox’ rendered as ruptures on the skin, may ‘become next week’s scarlet fever, or last month’s measles, or dermatitis’ (57). Through her ‘dermal counterfeit of contagion and disease’ (the hysteric was most often a woman), the hysteric incorporates the signs
of disease from an other’s body ‘as a reflection of her own’ (57). Through her inscribed body the hysteric subverts the difference – the ‘between-ness’ – of self and other, object and subject, and pose and possession (58). Likewise, the nineteenth-century practice and phenomenon of dermagraphism, in which Charcot hypnotised his patients and encouraged them to ‘perform their symptomatology’ through their bodies (57). Such markings, usually raised or bleeding lines, were secured through a perverse contract between doctor and patient, where the tactility of the hypnotist’s voice is rendered visible through the ‘dermal inscriptions’ on the patient’s body (58). The autographic skin of the patient becomes the embodied artwork of the physician’s commands, and thus theirs could be said to be a complicit relationship that confounds the integrity of their supposed autonomy as separate subjects, for just who is the creator of this macabre artwork, and ‘where do we locate its beginnings’? (58) The physician’s ‘images’, spoken as commands, literally become real/lised on the skin of the hypnotised patient, and this mutual creation is articulated through an inseparability that also corrupts and refigures the meanings ‘between representation and substance’ (61-2). Here writing is matter and matter is writing, and there is no ‘between-ness’ between them; there is no ‘gap’ that separates notions of cause and effect, a relationship that ‘presumes two independent moments’ (58). Like the thaipusam festival and its devotee, Charcot and his patient disturb nature/culture and mind/body divisions, because through their perverse artistic creation, the ‘language’ they produce – a representation, a text, a ‘writing’ – ‘bursts the boundaries of its conventional articulation’, to become and be literally ‘flesh’ – ‘fleshed’ out through and on the body (52).

Both the thaipusam devotee’s amazing embodied devotion and the hysteric’s bodily script/ures provoke us to at least consider Kirby’s suggestion that the body is remarkably ‘articulate’ and ‘uncannily thoughtful’. Is this flesh as/is text, or is that text as/is flesh? If we wish to follow Kirby and think the body or ‘matter’ differently, to disturb the nature/culture and mind/body dualisms, then in the case of the devotee and the hysteric, we have to admit that the very ‘stuff’ of the body remains mutable and both writes and is a writing. Additionally, the devotee and the hysteric again demonstrate how an ‘image could be said to rewrite the image-maker in a movement of production that disrupts the temporal determination of what comes first’ (61). However, because these provocative examples demonstrate no clear distinction between ‘representation and substance’ we perhaps should not conceive or conceptualise of ‘matter’ – the body
– ‘as fundamentally nothing other than its interpretation’ (70). But if the body is nothing other than its interpretation, then where does the ‘matter’ of the body reside, and why would, or should, ‘matter’ matter? Or perhaps more thought provokingly, how does interpretation ‘congeal into a corporeal reality’ for the subject? (72) Again, Kirby offers us another provocative example to convey how interpretation, systems of representing and representation, can be both embodied acts and acts of embodiment. ‘Matter’ matters here because it cannot be isolated from reference to it as the instrument of interpretation and representation.

Evelyn Glennie is a world-renowned percussionist; she is also profoundly deaf, yet it is clear from interviews that hers is a world ‘full of sound’. Kettle drums are ‘adjusted and retuned’, and wrong notes are ‘heard’ (63). Glennie explains how ‘she hears certain notes through her jaw, while others sound through parts of her face or certain parts of her feet and so on’ (63). Whilst for the majority of us the ‘legibility’ of sounds is heard via the intricate workings of the ear, for Glennie sound is ‘intricately scored and played through the staff of her body, recorded and performed in the very tissue of skin, blood, an bone’ (63). Sound is listened to as vibrations through the body, and sound is also read and rewritten through those vibrations of skin, blood and bone, and thus, Glennie’s music is not articulated or sensed as or through ‘separable realms’, but is heard and produced through her body. Glennie literally is her music; her ‘entire body has become sound’s instrument’ (62-3). Glennie ‘writes’ music through the flesh, blood and bone of her body, and so sound then, ‘is itself a text’, a bodily and embodied writing and reading that is not mediated by notions of author/reader or sender/receiver relationships, because in Glennie’s body-music there is no ‘difference in identity and location’; there is ‘no difference between creation and reception’ of her music (58).

If Glennie ‘is her music’, then we are forced to think about the ‘semiotic integrity’ of particular perceptual modes, and how, in the case of Glennie, the auditory is ‘corrupted by what is considered foreign to it, that is, information that hails from another sense system’, the tactile (62). Likewise, the dermatographic representations of the hysteric, whose ‘autographic’ skin ‘enmeshes the tissue of the visual, the auditory, and the tactile’ (62). Furthermore, being forced to think about this encourages us to re/consider the body as something that does indeed matter, particularly in the case of Glennie, whose music literally is ‘matter’, and whose music also forces us to confront a ‘Western
metaphysics that renders matter immaterial’ by carefully excluding the ‘purely physical thing’ from the ‘impression that it makes on our senses’ (55 my emphasis). For doesn’t the example of Glennie’s music render such metaphysics entirely questionable? Glennie is her music and her music is her bodily or embodied inscriptions and experiences, and so there is no separation between the ‘purely physical thing’ – sound – and the ‘impression it makes’ on her senses because both cannot be separated into either/or divisions. Once again, we witness the corruption of modes of thinking and systems of thought that rely on the nature/culture and mind/body dualisms.

What Kirby asks us to question through these provocative examples of bodily writings and inscriptions is the ‘supposed difference between material objects and immaterial signs’ (55), and the possibility that anatomy – the body – ‘flesh, blood and bone – literate matter – never ceases to reread and rewrite itself through endless incarnations’ (148). So, the body as ‘matter’ matters because the body is not a ‘supplementary ingredient’ to representation or interpretation, or the ‘substratum to which humanity’s cognisance of itself is attached’ (153), but is ‘already a field of information, a tissue of scriptural and representational complexity’ (148). ‘Matter’ then, should not be restricted to biology, nor to the ‘body’s surface’ as the ‘writing pad’ where cultural inscriptions beat a ‘tattoo…through which the body’s substance may be ciphered’ (77). The ‘matter’ of the body ‘is not located in the truth of biological substance, a truth that must remain inaccessible behind the skin of cultural interpretation’, but is ‘the very tissue of their interweaving’ (80 my emphasis). For Kirby, emphasis continues to be on thinking of corporeality, or the body, not through notions of disembodied speculation – as ‘separable and other’ – but as a thinking through and a thinking with the body (77). For as Kirby so eloquently reminds us, corporeality is an exchange between mind and body, an exchange that should not have to be explained as if the body were a mere visitor to the scene of this exchange (73).

If my prolonged discussion of Kirby’s provocative writing on corporeality has a ‘whiff’ of justification to it, it is only because, any exchange between mind and body, which typically presumes a division between the two, subsequently also presumes supplementation, articulation, and progress, such that the body is inevitably figured ‘as a tool or instrument of the mind’ (Kirby 1997, 148). By engaging with Kirby’s powerful examples of corporeality, I continue to be inspired to return to the body when ‘thinking’ that body, albeit always mindful that this incursion is traditionally considered to be
fraught with risk. Perhaps, as Kirby suggests, ‘commerce with the body’ is considered a ‘risky business’ because ‘the split between mind and body, the border across which interpretations of the body might be negotiated, just cannot be secured’ (73). ‘Thinking’ the body means dealing with and accepting this possibility; it also highlights that any punitive efforts to ‘resolve’ this issue are inevitably hopeless. Perhaps then, and with particular respect to theorising embodiment, this enables certain theoretical ‘freedoms’; any theorising engaged in can never be – or ever hope to be – confined to or constrained and prohibited by the need to provide definitive or ultimate definitions. Employing this position enables the theorist to defuse, even refuse, any suggestion that the body is a ‘supplement that we possess, or are possessed by’ (73). Such a belief proposes that ‘we are held hostage within the body, embodied, such that the site of self, the stuff of thinking and consciousness, is an isolate made of quite different matter’ (73). In an effort to move beyond this belief it is important to take a theoretical gamble, and acknowledge the limits of traditional mind/body theories.

The body cannot be constituted and ‘thought’ by being divided from itself in some kind of deferral, although this is how we are encouraged to think of the body in Western metaphysics – encouraged to make it our ‘interpretive limit’ (78). The body, suggests Kirby, is ‘always/already a field of language’ (77), and ‘the tissue of anatomy’ is not something ‘outside the play of textual writing’ but is itself a ‘scripture’ – a poetic statement borne out by her discussions of the devotee’s, the hysteric’s, and Evelyn Glennie’s bodily and embodied articulations (73). Through her discussions of those bodily and embodied writings, Kirby highlights how there is no ‘exchanging of nature for culture, reality for representation, and originary cause for interpretive effect’, but rather the recognition of the ‘literal and figural tissue of their mutual implication’ (78).

The body – ‘flesh, blood and bone’ – matters, for it is not a supplement, tool or instrument of the mind, but is always and already articulate, always and already inside and within ‘thought’; the body is an active participant in the writing and rewriting of the body. The ‘subject of ‘humanness’ – the fleshy subject – ‘resides at the same address’ as the subject of ‘thought’ (157).

With reference to Kirby’s provocative theorising and discussion of the remarkably articulate body, and her challenge to and subsequent highlighting of the inadequacy of mind/body and nature/culture dualisms for theorising that body, one might see how her
theories can be equally applied to drag king embodiment. For instance, it permits us to think about the various desires, accoutrements and ‘signs’ of masculinity played out on the female body, as corporeal, as becoming part of the body because articulated and interpreted through the body, and in a simultaneous movement, becoming meaningful as something corporeal through, paraphrasing Kirby, the ‘impression’ that it makes on the senses. In addition, Kirby’s theories remind us once again that the notion of a difference between the creating of the body and an expression of the body is refutable, for why should, or, more importantly, how could one determine the difference between the creating/created body and the expressing/expressed body? And, as Kirby asks, why would a division be necessary? (77)

Kirby’s provocative writing on corporeality forces me, yet again, to acknowledge the futility of considering the mind/body opposition, and other dualisms, when attempting to theorise or otherwise speculate on drag king embodiment. Further, it also allows me to continue to acknowledge the possibility that what is traditionally considered ‘immaterial’ might be incorporated by and articulated and interpreted through the body – could in fact be embodied – and thus, literally become ‘matter’ that matters. As an aside, Hoogland also provokes me to consider the immaterial as having inherently material possibilities. Whilst she suggests that by incorporating ‘increasingly sophisticated commercial products into our Selves’ we are ‘breaking away from our physical existence’, in terms of drag king embodiment I would argue that the incorporation of that considered ‘immaterial’ enhances physical existence and extends our physical capacities (Hoogland 2002, 228). If narratives of drag king embodiment ‘prove’ anything, it is that that embodiment highlights the sensuous, exploratory, imaginative, and limitless capacities of bodies, and their desire to corpor/realise that which is considered not of the body. Further, shouldn’t we also seriously consider the possibility that individual investments in masculinity, such as personal desires and fantasies, and identifications with masculinity, ‘congeal into a corporeal reality’ for those women who use drag kining as the forum for expressing, performing and embodying those investments, or who see drag kining as a bodily elaboration of their own female masculinity? (Kirby 1997, 72)

This suggestion also lets us continue to speculate on how there may be no definite distinction between ‘signs’ of masculinity as ‘immaterial’, and the embodied experience
of corpo/realising – ‘materialising’ – them through drag king embodiment. Or, put in another way, the drag king literally incorporates signs of masculinity directly through and as bodily articulation, and in so doing, disturbs the supposed integrity between the immateriality of the sign and the materiality of the body. Rather than siding with any either/or – mind/body, nature/culture – theories of corporeality, Kirby’s challenging inquiries into theories of the body – ‘human matter’ – inspire a disturbing of those categories (3). As she writes: ‘I’ve tried to disturb oppositional categories by sustaining the tension between them’ (2). Her discussions on the thaipusam devotee, the hysteric, and Evelyn Glennie certainly maintain that ‘tension’, for their stories profoundly challenge any easy theorising of the body of nature and the nature of the body, confounding as they do, within the individual, any simple notions of inside/outside divisions (3).

5.3.1 Comparative but Interconnected Notions of Embodiment.

I really have never felt like I’ve had to put a lot of thought behind creating a [drag king] character. I simply named my maleness. Jay is me, I am Jay. I do however know when I feel like Jay the most. It happens when I’m completely dressed for a show, facial hair, dick, everything on. I usually light a cigarette and BAM [sic] Jay has entered the building! The first time it happened, it was a little strange. Now it’s like that movie ‘Field of Dreams’, if I build Him, He will come!

- Jen Lindsey of H.I.S. Kings

Personally, when I don male gear, or ‘drag’, it isn’t so much a ‘coming out’ as it is a ‘dipping in’.

- Kate X Messer

*Not Your Daddy’s Facial Hair*

Action is productive rather than representational. Accordingly, one should ask what an action does rather than what it means.

- Bray and Colebrook

*The Haunted Flesh* (57)
In light of the preceding analyses, it is evident that the corporeal or phenomenal body and the discursive and socially produced body are not reducible to easy either/or dualisms, but are always in a complex, dynamic relationship, and so are always ‘thoroughly interfused’ (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 52). For drag kings any perception or ‘feeling’ of self in drag is certainly going to be influenced by, or even be the product of, the social/discursive acting on and through the body, but equally that ‘self’ in drag is itself acting through the body to affect drag king embodiment. This relationship should be seen as a dynamic interconnected and carnal one, and what should be emphasised here is the interrelationship connecting those embodied ‘selves’, and how this interrelationship is equally representative of drag king embodiment as it is the result of drag king embodiment. The ‘lived’ or subjective experience of drag king embodiment is not easily reducible to discrete or distinct notions of between-ness when attempting to explain it. Just as the self/mind and body are not distinct ‘things’, or two attributes of a single ‘thing’, but are announced as somewhere in between, perhaps the experience of drag king embodiment may also be announced (129).

This dynamic recalls Grosz’s employment of the möbius strip, a model she borrows to demonstrate the inflection of mind into body and body into mind (Grosz 1994, xii). The möbius strip is a topological puzzle whereby a strip of paper or a ribbon is twisted once and attached end to end so that it forms a circular twisted surface. The möbius strip has both an inside and an outside surface, yet if one traverses its surface without ‘stepping’ off it, it becomes a circular journey, facilitating a continuous traversing of the inside and the outside where one can move from one space to another without ever having to lift one’s feet off its surface. Grosz proposes that we think of the material body as comprising the inside of the möbius strip, and experience, mind and culture as constituting the outside of the surface. However, as the image of the möbius strip suggests, there is always a continuous inflection of one into the other and vice versa, meaning neither is ultimately reducible to one thing or the other, and there can never really be any intrinsic demarcation between them (Grohl 2005). As Bray and Colebrook note, whilst Grosz’s deployment of the möbius strip as a metaphor for the body/mind relationship suggests a dynamic whereby mind and body are inseparable, they argue that her ‘outside in’ and ‘inside out’ approach still rests on notions of interior/exterior boundaries, and thus, does not ultimately overcome dualism.
Bray and Colebrook argue that continued emphasis on the ‘interior’ subject and its constitution in relation to an exteriority ignores the malleability and fluidity of those boundaries (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 45). Taking my cue from Bray and Colebrook, it is perhaps more productive to argue for those boundaries as inherently dynamic, such that neither is ever considered ‘other’. Bray and Colebrook’s argument interrogates and refuses the notion of subjectivity as the unconscious introjection of one’s visualised or represented body, along with the corresponding deduction that representation must be fundamental to the production of the embodied subject. Further, they reject the notion that corporeality and materiality are radically anterior to thought, ‘or negated by representation’ (38):

That is, the body is not a prior fullness, anteriority, or plenitude that is subsequently identified and organized through restricting representations. Representations are not negations imposed on otherwise fluid bodies …. On the contrary … representations, and significations (as well as bodies) are aspects of ongoing practices of negotiation, reformation, and encounter (38).

This positive approach to the body grants both ‘thought’ and materiality significance without resorting to either as determining the status of the body. In addition, it acknowledges that the body is a negotiation with pleasures, pains, other bodies, space, and so on, rather than just the effect of representation or representation’s other. By adopting this positive ‘philosophy’ of the body, I want to further the proposition of the dynamism of embodiment and being. Further, this proposition adopts Bray and Colebrook’s assertion that ‘matter, or the body, would not be thought’s ‘other’ if thinking were seen as a desiring production, a comportment, and activity, or an ethos’ (56). The body, they argue, ‘is not essentially anterior or other’ (56). If we think along the same lines as Bray and Colebrook we can avoid being confined by theories of ‘constitutive negation’, such as, the mind is other than the body, meaning is other than matter, and materiality is other than determination (56). Furthermore, if we imagine the metaphor of the möbius strip within this context, rather than through the metaphor of the binary, we open up a theoretical space to think of the body, once again, as unfixed, mutable and capable of somatic expression, interpretation, and embodiment of desires, imaginings, identifications, and that which is considered immaterial.
As a consequence of the processes already discussed we might argue that ‘selves’ operate by means of our bodies, just as bodies operate by means of our selves, and thus ‘embodiment is itself as productive of selves as they of it’ (Wilton 2000, 250-51). Paradoxically, this also draws attention to the idea of embodiment as some/thing ‘other’ than the body. Paying attention to it is, as Wilton suggests, attention directed at ‘that which ‘is’ embodied. It is whatever inhabits the …body that matters’ (240). Yes, and what is significant ‘matters’ precisely because it is matter, it is of the body. This also follows, once again, the notion of a ‘union between the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological’’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 80), that we are ‘in the world through our body, and … we perceive that world within our body’ (206). Taking my cue from Merleau-Ponty then, I continue to promote the possibility that a female drag king’s personal desires and fantasies for and about masculinity, along with her identifications with masculinity, have a bodily – a physical basis; that is, they are rooted within the body, enacted by and through the body, and thus, are embodied. Further, continual attention to the corporeal body is also meant to highlight and promote the persistent sensuousness of the body, its insistence on ‘knowing’ and creating through the flesh, and its delight or even wonder, in doing so. In light of this I borrow from Wilton and continue to advance the idea of the ‘constitutivity of the corporeal – its part in the making of … subjectivities’ (248). Whilst this certainly supports Barad’s statement that the body is not a ‘passive surface awaiting the mark of culture’, that ‘culture ‘shapes’ or ‘inscribes’’ the body but does not materially produce it, I also acknowledge that how and why that body matters, again, in both senses of the word, is in some way both the product of cultural inscriptions and human agency (Barad 2003, 825-27). However, I continue to promote the ‘constitutivity’ of the corporeal over the culturally inscribed corporeal body, to confirm a refusal to accept the idea of the body as the effect of representation and body image – as ‘semiotic symptom’ – and to reject any mind-dependant account of the body (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 55).

As Bray and Colebrook continue to argue, any suggestion that the body (with particular reference being made to the female body) is just a ‘body image’ is to promote the body and its capacities as functioning merely as sign, theatre or representation. Furthermore, it promotes a body that is passively formed through and merely the effect of the internalisation and introjection of a representational system that is generally regarded as ‘monolithically phallocentric’ (52). This hardly accounts for or acknowledges any
active or positive role the body/self plays in its own production or self-formation; it
denies the body’s ‘positivity’, rendering it merely effect and image. It is more
productive to imagine the body as affect/tive; this at least proposes a dynamic,
‘eventful’ body, a positing of the body as productive and creative, and thus, as always in
the process of self-formation and invention. Such an ascription to the body also avoids
the positing of any ‘primary explanandum’ of which those productions, creations and
self-formations would be regarded as effects (59). More particularly, to imagine
embodiment and corporeality as a form of ‘positive self-production’ continues to focus
on the body, not the body-as-image or the body as repressed effect (63). This focus is
more interested in the body’s affectations, comportments, effects and creations, and on
what that body does and produces.
NOTE: This plate is included on page 166 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Plate 7. Drag King Eduardo
6. AND THE DRESS WAS MADE FLESH

Undeniably, the language of clothes and bodily adornment generally experiments relentlessly with ways of defining and redefining the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside. The boundary never survives these alchemical processes as an intact and inviolable barrier. As regions to be playfully traversed, rather than frontiers to be crossed only at the trespasser’s own irreparable peril, the boundaries proposed by dress are eminently disrespectful of notions of either integrity or reparation…. Therefore, these boundaries are far more permeable structures than any of those beloved of classical logic. Each side of the border may at any point spill over into the other and thus spawn, by osmosis and contagion, a hybrid clan of unpredictable mutants. Each of the seemingly bounded parties on either side of the partition is continually in the process of becoming otherwise.

- Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick

_Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and Body_ (xviii)

(W)ith the simple addition of facial hair and a pair of boots I have doubled in size!

- Pelvis Parsley

Cited in Sheila ‘Dragon Fly’ Koenig, _Walk like a Man_ (145)

Why should our bodies end at the skin?

- Donna Haraway

_A Manifesto for Cyborgs_ (178)

In drag kinging the female drag king body is constructed as and through the ‘artefacts’ of various masculine signs and vestimentary codes, be that clothing, the application of facial hair, the use of a ‘pack’ to simulate a penis bulge, and the binding of breasts to create a flat masculine chest (Carvallaro and Wawrick 1998, 167). However, it is equally important to suggest that such artefacts are articulated as and through a body. That is, such artefacts might be considered carnal, as being part of the body, ‘felt’ through the body, and as having particular significance and meaning(s), because produced on, through, and incorporated by this body. In this way, we can also think about just what those artefacts have made of that body, and what that body has made of those artefacts. More provocatively, and paraphrasing Williams and Bendelow’s view regarding the ‘incorporative capacities’ of the body/image and its ‘social extensions with the outside world’, couldn’t we think of the facial hair, or the packing of a dildo or
sock to simulate a penis bulge, for example, as forming part of the body/image as they are simultaneously ‘felt’ on the body and lived through the body? (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 99) Could we not argue that such is the body’s creative and incorporative capacities, that whether through actual connection, or as effected through fantasy and desire, ‘corporeal fusion’ with what is considered ‘other’ to the body is possible? (Hoogland 2002, 226) That is, those artefacts are felt and lived at the level of bodily sensation, individual investment in them and as a form of embodied ‘knowing’ simultaneously, and therefore, become part of the body/image – become ‘incarnated knowledge’ (226). And paraphrasing Grosz to support this, might not those artefacts, even though they are, strictly speaking, ‘separated in space from the body’, still be part(s) of the body/image? (Grosz 1994, 213). What I am arguing for is the tactility of personal investments in and fantasies around the dress and accoutrements of the dragged-up body – for instance, clothing, a sock stuffed down one’s pants, or the application of sideburns. The personal bodily experience of dress and those accoutrements does not necessarily accord with discourses that would render them immaterial, that is, not of ‘the body’. This suggests that the phenomenological body is a site of resistance to such discourses, and further, is capable of experiencing bodily resonance with and sense/ual perception of that which is considered not of the material body.

For instance, although Cavallaro and Warwick note that dress, in framing the body, contributes to the transformation and definition of the materiality of that body into a cultural image or signifier, they also acknowledge the tricky question of whether the body’s intimate connection with dress is part of its being or rather ‘an item in the parcel of its having’ (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 4). Further, in considering the subject’s ambivalent relation to its body, that is, is it something it is or has, they wonder to ‘what extent dress contributes to, or indeed confirms, the body’s status as a disembodied representation’, or ‘to what extent dress, as a material phenomenon in its own right, reinforces a view of the body as an irreducibly corporeal dimension’ (4). As they write: ‘[T]he subject is a body and has a body; but it also is and has, at one and the same time, the clothes that wear it’ (4). This paradox, they suggest, is indicative of changing perceptions of corporeality, where the breach of bodily boundaries remains a recurrent theme in contemporary Western society, particularly since dress, although more

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28 The dragged-up body refers to the female body dressed and performing as a drag king.
traditional, may also be considered to operate as a ‘contemporary mechanism of mediation’, much like the simulated and the hyperreal, which problematises the relationship between biological and artificial or technical bodies – or the material and the immaterial (4). Effectively, dress questions the boundaries and frames of the body and, subsequently, the ‘ideal of a unified identity’. Further, dress highlights the body’s incorporative, ambiguous, and open-ended status, rather than something that is static, timeless or ahistorical (5).

Whilst Cavallaro and Warwick argue that dress actively contributes to the corporeality of the body as a discursive phenomenon, aiding the processes of cultural legitimation, I am more interested in extending their theory to argue that at the same time dress promotes the body’s ‘multiplicity by grafting upon it additional layers, surfaces and personas’ (7 my emphasis). On the one hand, they write how ‘dress is instrumental to the collective orchestration of cultural experience through its ability to cast the body into moulds that correspond to certain socially agreed definitions of an intelligible reality’ (7). But, on the other hand, they declare that ‘dress makes the dominant culturescape eminently hybrid, ambivalent and ambiguous through its apparently random, intertextual, irreverent and eclectic appropriation and recycling of disparate motifs and styles. It flouts consistency and stability [and] challenges hierarchies and boundaries’ (7). This analysis of dress is easily applied to theorising the contemporary body and recalls the idea of dress as a mechanism for challenging the supposedly ‘fixed’ materiality of the body while at the same time being employed as a ‘framing strategy’ that can never ultimately but only provisionally represent that body. These claims, together with the claims that the body is and has the clothes that wear it, that dress promotes the body’s multiplicity by highlighting its incorporative capacities, and that it challenges the boundaries and frames between the material and immaterial, can be effectively employed to examine the embodied and corporeal effects of the clothing and accoutrements of drag kinging.

Dress, write Cavallaro and Warwick, ‘represents the body as a fundamentally liminal phenomenon’ because its stresses the body’s ‘precarious location on the threshold between the physical and the abstract, the literal and the metaphorical’ (7). What is more, they write that ‘the transition from the material to the metaphorical, and vice versa, is not a smooth passage … from carnality to disembodiment or … from
abstraction to incarnation’ (7). Any transition, they argue, is never really conclusive, because the framing strategies enacted by dress can only ever provisionally represent experience. Further, those framing strategies, which involve ‘open-ended’ processes of temporal, spatial and physical disjunction and displacement, only serve to emphasise the ‘uncertainty of any spaces that the body may strive to inhabit or indeed may be allowed to lay claims on’ (7). Whilst this may sound bleak for the subject, replete as it is with notions of uncertainty, disorientation, transit, and ‘split’ identities, it also offers scope for the subject to contest, negotiate and redefine their corporality (7). Although Cavallaro and Warwick’s discourse of dress highlights the mediation, translation and displacement of corporeality, it also illustrates the ‘pliable’ character of our bodies – the body’s potential for ‘critical and creative relocation and reinscription’ – and hence the ‘body’s potential boundlessness as a source of inspiration for ever-shifting experimental redefinitions’ (8). It is paradoxical then, that given the inherently flexible nature of bodily existence, Western thought has sought to view this as motivation for the establishment of binary modes of being, and Cavallaro and Warwick write:

The prioritising of concepts such as mind, spirit or soul over body, substance and matter, for example, points precisely to a desire to stem the implicit subversiveness of the body as a sprawling tissue of inextricably connected life and death drives by recourse to sanitizing sets of adversarial relationships (8).

The desire to create binary or ‘adversarial’ relationships recognises, and thus seeks to reconcile, the inherent dynamic dimensions of corporeal experience, which remain in a constant and ongoing dialogue. The discourse of dress outlined through Cavallaro and Warwick’s analysis highlights dress’ role in both, paradoxically, circumscribing and consolidating the body and revealing its boundlessness. Rather than viewing this only in a negative light, as a continuous and unresolved struggle of irreconcilable corporeality, it can also be appropriated to promote the body as a sense-seeking, desiring, transitory, boundless and ultimately duplicitous entity (22). Further, any meaning that the body is likely to accrue, they argue, can only proceed from acceptance of its ‘disorienting juxtaposition of a socialized bounded edge and a subversive, limitless one’ (22). Perhaps, in light of this, it is feasible to suggest that the body is a ‘boundary concept’ figured at the crossroads of nature and culture, mind and matter; it is at once the ‘actualization of corporeality and a conceptual framework’, and thus is always in an
ongoing production and process of knowing and marking a/it self (Hoogland 2002, 224).

That the body exists in a contradictory and uncertain space of both consolidation and dissolution highlights both the ‘precariousness of its limits’, and its unlimited potential (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 22). Further, Cavallaro and Warwick’s analysis of dress as both a framing strategy that seeks to recall and represent the body as ‘complete’, whilst ultimately revealing it as ‘incomplete’, emphasises both the uncertainty of defining the body and its boundaries and the fluidity of its frame, which raises the question of ‘where does the body end and where does dress begin?’ (xvii) The implications of this question are obvious if we consider the many drag king narratives that point to the embodied effects of engaging with the various accoutrements and clothing of masculine drag, because they promote the inherent permeability of taken for granted body/dress boundaries. In addition, it again conjures up the possibility of internalising what should be only external, to the extent that those accoutrements and clothes create and promote embodied effects, which in turn affect certain modes of behaviour and comportment, and personal beliefs and feelings about one’s corporeality. In this instance ‘dress clothes the body from the inside as a self-fashioning discourse’ (15). The body, having ‘turned itself inside out’ to declare its ability to incarnate one’s desires, fantasies, and identifications with masculinity through the supposed exteriority of clothing and other accoutrements, simultaneously proceeds to ‘fold back upon itself’ by re-introjecting29 the personal investments made in those clothes and accoutrements, permitting them to also ‘exercise their power from within’ (15). Whilst Cavallaro and Warwick would suggest this process makes the body a ‘battlefield on which inner and outer dimensions of experience engage in an unresolved, ongoing struggle’, it also suggests the endless possibilities for contravening conventions, limitations and proscriptions placed on the body and its activities (15). Rather than seeing that ‘struggle’ as a negative and antagonistic process to be overcome, the unresolved nature of this process serves to highlight, once again, the futility of seeking resolutions at all. What it also demonstrates is the limitless potential and duplicitous nature of bodies and selves, and their disregard for the rules implicit in the notion of boundaries, imposed or assumed.

29 Introjection refers to the incorporation of (attitudes or ideas) into one's personality unconsciously. However, throughout this chapter I employ it to promote that introjection as a conscious, intentional act or action.
The self/body experiencing drag king embodiment seeks no resolution between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of experience played out on and through that body. In fact, there is no inner/outer dimension but a dynamic fusion. Following this line of thought we can continue to think of ‘corporeality as an attribute of inanimate no less than animate matter’, and narratives of drag king embodiment certainly promote this (46). As both the force behind and made meaningful through drag king embodiment, dress (defined here as those clothes and accoutrements employed in drag kinging), whilst supposedly an inanimate object, and so inherently powerless, is transformed into an active agent by its ability to provide the body with signifying powers that the body incarnates, ‘wears’ and lives (60). Drag king embodiment, seen and interpreted as a transformation of the body, not against but through and within the ‘usual’ body, takes place as the ‘flesh is re-created and re-presented’ within its covering or application of signifying dress (77). Again, instead of considering this dynamic as simply and strictly comparative, or one based on notions of liberation from the body, it remains more complex than this.

In order that drag king embodiment be made meaningful for the subject, the conventions and discourses that both inform and surround the female body are adhered to in order that a tension is created between those conventions and discourses as ‘reality’ (however this is personally manifested and lived), and the fantasy of ‘fleshing’ out the clothing and accoutrements of drag kinging. Were drag kings to completely repudiate Western culture’s and their own reality of what it means to be a female in our society, there would be no tension, and borrowing from Cavallaro and Warwick, ‘without tension there would be no pleasure’, hence, the tantalising paradox of the experience and meaningfulness of drag king embodiment as both conformist and subversive (57-58). This paradox also extends to the clothing and accoutrements of drag, although there is certainly room for playful reception, interpretation, and private fantasies to flout the rules and conventions surrounding the accepted meanings and laws of dress. However, such flouting is never self-contained or wholly individual, for it still relies on a perverse intentional interaction with those meanings and laws to effect any impression or pleasure. Paraphrasing Cavallaro and Warwick: nobody can unequivocally associate individual dress with personal fantasies and desires as ‘fully rounded wholes’, or exploit dress as ‘a self-differentiating structure’, because the meanings and uses of dress result from the coalescence of both socially acceptable and
fragmentary and conflicting discourses and permutations (47). Equally, no garment, accessory, or even those accoutrements ostensibly employed for a specific purpose, incarnate unproblematically ‘a symbolic content, instantly recognizable and decodable’, and thus, dress, like the body, is inherently duplicitous, no matter how much it is beset with specific vestimentary codes and conventions (47).

Nevertheless, and herein lies the perverse paradox, dress operates at one and the same time as an incarnation of symbolic and social laws and as an always-already potentially ‘anti’ and rebellious force (57). As Warwick and Cavallaro note, whilst dress serves to ostensibly valorise the ‘corporeal calibre’ of the body, it always and also is capable of metamorphosing the body (191). Although they view this paradox, rather negatively, as condemning the body to ‘a limbo of permanent estrangement from itself and others’, I see the paradox in this body/dress relationship as positive (191). It is precisely within this paradox that the body/dress relationship may be one of sensuous and polysemic potential and interaction. And whilst Cavallaro and Warwick stress the ability of dress to culturally ‘edit’ carnality, and this is true in narratives of drag king embodiment, that ‘editing’ is, more often than not, a sensuous and pleasurable confrontation with and enhancement of one’s corporeal reality; the body is seen as a sight of gratification rather than alienation (192). Moreover, it is precisely the perverse paradox inherent in dress that makes it available for appropriation and mis-appropriation in drag kinging. It is this dissonant quality of dress and the dress/body relationship that is capitalised on in drag kinging to evoke drag king embodiment; there is no attempt to reconcile either, for in non-reconciliation lies potentially limitless possibilities for desires, fantasies, ideals, and identifications to be corpor/realised.

In light of the preceding analysis, it is no wonder dress can function as a medium through which the powerful embodied effects of drag kinging may be corp/realised. Embodying an ambiguity centred on symbolic codes and conventions and fantastical force and potential, dress is vulnerable to potentially limitless mutations and violations of its codes, whilst providing a powerful avenue for summoning and carnalising personal desires and identifications. Therefore, that analysis positively supports the very real phenomenal experience of engaging with the signifying garments and accessories of drag kinging, and the potential for those same signifying garments and accessories to become metonymic and prosthetic substitutes that activate and sustain
drag king embodiment. In fact, dress may act as the very catalyst through and by which culturally and personally constructed signs and discourses of masculinity (and femininity), as understood, incorporated, and identified by the individual, along with personal fantasies and desires, are united, projected onto each other, and are made to converge into the experience of drag king embodiment (47). Seen in this context, dress can animate corporeality, become symbolic ‘flesh’, manipulate the body, and become as ‘real’ as the body wearing and occupying it. The duplicitous nature and sensuous materiality of dress acts as both a surrogate body, and as a ‘vehicle for unlimiting embodied subjectivity’; it both conceals and reveals the body (88).

Dress then, has the ability to both decarnalise the body whilst also being incorporated by it. In drag king narratives, dress could be said to be employed as a material surrogate for ‘physicalising’ personal desires, fantasies and identifications with masculinity. In this context, dress further problematises the body’s precarious borders, as it simultaneously celebrates this very fact in order to elicit the corporeal experience of drag king embodiment (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 89). If we conceive of dress in drag king narratives as a way of summoning drag king embodiment, we endow it with autonomous powers based on its ability to create and sustain that embodiment, because we can read it in terms of its role in both negating and substituting flesh (129). In this respect dress can certainly be said to decarnalise the body, but it is also the case that this ‘decarnalisation’ ushers in new bodily and embodied powers and experiences, specifically connected to performing, dressing in, and literalising masculine drag (129). Dress is possessed by the body wearing and engaging with it; the body may appear to be stripped of its carnality because it ‘makes room’ for the adoption of alternative capabilities and capacities, meaning dress may literally appropriate the body of its wearer, but it is also the case that the body literalises, shapes and gives expression to dress, which, without the body, is quite literally a ‘limp casing’ (129).

To try to reduce the dress/body relationship of drag king embodiment to the question of what is more ‘real’ – the body or the dress that covers it – remains untenable when speculating upon that experience. Whilst dress seeks to regulate corporeality, and even claims to transcend it, it is also inevitably attached to it and thus carries with it the taint of alliance with matter (138-139). Dress, then, operates as much through the body as the body operates through the manipulations of dress, and moreover, dress can be
personally and collectively invested with the power to evoke and invoke individual desires, fantasies and identifications, such as those engaged with in drag kinging. Those desires, fantasies and identifications are stimulated in the wearer such that dress, ‘may be equated with an experience of intoxication that involves simultaneously the psychological and physiological dimensions of the subject’s being’ (140). Dress, argue Cavallaro and Warwick, fits the wearer no less mentally than physically.

6.1 Don’t be a Dick – Wear One

After about six months of performing, Jay was screaming that he wanted a dick too! A great big one! Well, I decided to give him one, but certainly not the two footer he asked for.

- Jen (Jay Crew), H.I.S Kings

Putting on a costume, packing and putting on facial hair does give me a different bodily experience…. As Johnny Kat, I gesture differently, walk differently, speak differently; I do all of these things to evoke the man I believe him to be.

- Stacey

Doing drag doesn’t necessarily mean that I am being a man…. I ‘dress up’ because for me it’s a way of transgressing gender, it is a way of expressing myself and being true to myself…. It makes me feel more secure and more me…. When I am in drag I am more outgoing and more confident inside, externally and in bed…. I dress up in combats, tee shirts, dog collars, trainers, or when I am with my partner it is more a suit, shirt, tie, packing type of boy … he is quiet but likes women and using his pack.

- Jai

In drag, I’m a fag. Always…. I think my queerness in real life makes me feel like a faggot when I’m dressed up as a boy.

- T-Rok, Back Door Boys

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Disposable Boy Toys – “The Sugar Daddy Show”
I can be in drag (packing, binding, facial hair, etc.) and still step back and say; ‘my real name is Melanie and I’m a dyke’. But, when I’m in character, I’m not a lesbian. I’m a guy and my sexuality is pretty fluid. I like boys and some women.

- Melanie (Jake Danger), Disposable Boy Toys

Damien has developed and grown as I have, and he is pretty much an extension of myself. Some people call me Damien, and I’m okay with that…. Damien is not just a drag character (and) although I distinguish between drag and transgenderism, I feel that Damien is becoming more a reality in my life, and it makes me feel good to know I have the opportunity to explore him.

- Damien ‘the devil’ Venture, Disposable Boy Toys

I perform in drag because it allows me to express more sides of myself, especially my “masculine” side…. At times when I am performing in drag I feel like I am being “possessed” by masculine energy.

- Gender Illusionist Dred

Body modification in drag kinging would be to me packing, binding, posture (and) voice alteration. If my assumption is correct, then yes, kinging facilitates other identities and sexualities. And to others, it would facilitate the actual or “natural” identity of that person.

- Clarissa (Carlos Los Vegas)

If dress can be seen as both an extension of the body and not part of it, then depending on the context where the body/dress relationship is ‘acted out’, dress could equally be seen as both ‘integral to the subject’s identity or as dispensable appendages’, pointing to the contradictory ability of dress to both link and separate the biological and social (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 186). In narratives of drag king embodiment, such as those excerpted above in the form of quotes, dress is not discussed as simply an extension of the body, but rather as something incorporated by the body to help effect that embodiment. However, in true contradictory style, drag kings also discuss dress within discourses that call to mind the notion of dress as ‘dispensable appendages’, or indeed, as prosthetic substitutes. However, whilst it may appear that carnality is transformed into dress as a substitute flesh in narratives of drag king embodiment, it is equally the case that dress is genuinely embodied by the subject to produce corporeal effects. How do we reconcile this contradiction?
The sense/ual experiences of drag king embodiment, as they are expressed in drag king narratives, rely on an intertwining of flesh and dress, which again serves to problematise the boundaries and hierarchies between these elements, and recalls the futility of prioritising mind and the immaterial over body and matter, or vice versa (187). The experience of this intertwining is nicely elaborated in Alana’s account of her ‘phantom cock’. By stuffing a sock down her pants to simulate a penis bulge, Alana experiences both the metamorphosing capabilities of dress and the corporeal capabilities of her body. She writes: ‘I feel like I can possess the cock that is not biologically mine, [sic] this part amazed me when I first started kinging, [sic] I didn’t expect that that pair of socks would feel like an extension of myself” (my emphasis). Far from securing estrangement from the body, dress in this instance valorises corporeality’s limitless and plausible combinations, and the materiality of meaning making for the individual. As previously suggested, dress frames the body, as it simultaneously increases its limits, highlights its attributes and potentialities, and hence, unlimits it by creating a dialogue between all of its elements and the physical self (191). While dress, as a fundamentally ‘concealing’ or screening agent, may be interpreted as constraining or repressing the body and its desires, it also, paradoxically, holds enabling potentialities based around pleasure and affectivity in the production of that body and its desires; this, quite literally, is highlighted in Alana’s embodied experience of a sock cock (xxi).

Alana employs a sock to affect the bulge of a penis and is pleasantly shocked and amazed when it feels like she possesses the ‘cock’ that is not biologically hers. In her case, the value and meaning of a sock, whilst understood within the conventional manner, is re-negotiated and re-interpreted to affect a penis, and this, quite literally, highlights the ambivalent nature of dress, because although dress is essentially disciplinary and protective, it is, at the same time, potentially subversive (xxi). In addition, Alana’s interpretation of her phantom cock as an extension of herself coincides with the production of that sock/cock as embodied effect. Her interpretation does not merely clarify that she has a sock/cock, but actively makes it. Interpretation here is not just an adjunct to the embodied effects of wearing a sock-as-a-cock, or a post-descriptive analysis of stuffing a sock down one’s pants and imagining it as a ‘real’

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31 As an aside, it is interesting to compare Alana’s comments with discourses of the biological penis as something that can become ‘personified’ in its own right, as in, it is often discussed within discourses that see it as relatively independent from the body, and having a mind of its own (Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 188-9.
penis, but is both the producer and result of the carnal dimensions of a sock/cock. The body, it seems then, can be as creative and ‘mindful’ as much as the mind is made ‘flesh’ and incarnated through dress, bodily production and sensation, and in this case the body/dress relationship highlights how interpretation can be limitless and an unlimited experience. Not only that, the intimate but ‘equal’ association between the corporeal and the sartorial in narratives of drag king embodiment, again highlights the futility of differentiating or fixing boundaries between human and non-human, or the material and the immaterial.

Dress, then, is both a body and not a body, both of the body yet separable from it, and we could equally say the same of the body; that is, the body is both what it wears but what resists ever being ‘completed’ or fully contained by what it wears; it is both made by dress and separable from it (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 195). The contradictory, irreducible, and so ultimately irresolvable relationship between dress and the body, recalls previous discussions that sought to emphasise the collapse of traditional relationships of ‘between-ness’, such as those of the nature/culture, concept/materiality, word/world and mind/body divisions, because it could be said that the experience or theorising of drag king embodiment lies ambiguously across all of these divisions. The dress/body relationship in narratives of drag king embodiment also highlights dress’ role as simultaneously a framing structure, a mediator, and as a type of ‘releasing agent’ (5). More specifically, dress serves as a vehicle for both literalising desires, fantasies and identifications with masculinity and as a culturally coded and meaningful device that the subject purposely introjects in order to make viable and public those desires, fantasies and identifications.

The body in narratives of drag king embodiment continues to be a ‘multi-accentual and polymorphous concept’, largely due to that body’s status as a meeting point of various and changing ‘psychological, physiological and ideological’ discourses and constructions (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 5). The body, we are also reminded, is ‘both an object represented … and an organism that is organized to represent’, and thus, the body is both constrained by and pivotal to systems of representation that intertwine and overlap (6). Whilst Cavallaro and Warwick suggest all of this makes the body an ‘uncomfortable compound’, it is also the case that such discourses, constructions and systems of representation paradoxically acknowledge the inherent fluidity and limitless
potential of bodies, and hence, their malleable qualities and creative capabilities. Whilst serving to both displace corporeality and consolidate it by constructing and reconstructing the body, those discourses, constructions and representations, like dress, maximise the body’s potential subversiveness and boundless-ness, because none of them can ultimately contain, ground, or define the body and its boundaries.

The preceding analysis of the body/dress relationship prompts the realisation that ‘physicality is only one of the body’s many attributes’ (Cavallaro and Warwick 1998, 205). The body is not ‘unproblematically equatable to its carnal properties’, and dress along with the mind/body connection, emphasises this (205). However, this doesn’t mean that one’s sense of embodiment or embodied experience is not visceral, or experienced as real, but rather recognition that perhaps ‘the body is all, and simultaneously, the metaphors into which its physical substance is translated and translatable’ (205). Whilst this teasingly suggests the ‘reality’ of embodiment may be a fiction, and less tangible, it also provokes recognition of the body’s creative ability to generate and embody further ‘fictions’, to become a literal metaphor (205). In light of this, the experience of drag king embodiment is ‘neither incontrovertibly real nor purely fantastic’, but reveals the body’s ingenuity and pliability, for as we have seen in the drag king narratives already discussed, the body is a creative force able to generate and materialise combinations and incarnations of the self’s desires, fantasies and identifications with masculinity, and in this sense, drag king embodiment is the materialisation of those desires, fantasies and identifications fleshed out through the body, not just the semiotic result of them (205).

6.2 This is not about what I’m not.

…I was a changed woman though I had imagined cross-dressing was a game…

- Ann Tweedy, JD

*A Voice from the Audience* (189)

Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds.

- Elizabeth Grosz

*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (vii)
Promotion of the body’s continued ingenuity and incorporative capacities is also in line with previous discussions that emphasise drag king embodiment as a further rather than other materialisation of the body; yet we could also explain drag king embodiment as – oxymoronically – a form of simultaneous dis-embodiment and re-embodiment through embodied acts. Perhaps more accurately it is a conscious and simultaneous embodiment, disembodiment and re-embodiment, which permits both an advance through and a retreat from the ‘usual’ body (prescribed, constrained, disciplined, ‘feminine’ and so on), but equally and simultaneously, an embodiment through that ‘usual’ body – within that body – of an ‘otherwise’, often idealised, surprising, or incongruent body/image. This dynamic still emphasises the creative and incorporative capacities of the body, and, in this instance, changes in ‘body image’ can become ‘changes at the level of the body itself’, just as ‘corporeal changes’ can be ‘registered in changes in the body image’ (Grosz 1994, 76). This mutual exchange points, yet again, to both the futility of thinking of the body as immutable or ‘fixed’, and of attempting to theorise drag king embodiment within traditional disciplines of thought that create hierarchies or divisions, or fixed boundaries of between-ness. Perhaps it is better to imagine drag king embodiment as not inherently grounded on anything other than its own becoming, and as always a ‘being otherwise’ in the Deleuzean sense. While it is a form of bodily comportment or corporeality that effects a difference or creates a disruption of and distance from regularised or normalised ways of being, that embodiment is still simply one form of self-formation amongst others, and therefore, once again, is not a rebellion against or negation of ‘femaleness’ or one’s female body (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 58).

Again, it is more useful to conceive of the body/body image (I don’t make any distinction here between body and body image), as ‘pliable’, in as much as any physiological/psychological sense of embodiment/body image is created out of and ‘felt’, in Deleuzean terms, through a process of becoming in relation to other becomings (this also recalls the metaphor of the palimpsest) (Colebrook 2002, 128). The ‘body’, in this case, is more than itself; the body is always becoming. Embodiment ‘becomes’ through what William’s and Bendelow call the ‘lived, experiential body’, that is, that body’s ‘praxical’, and thus relational, ‘relationship to the world’ (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 208). Whilst this praxical relationship suggests there is a body constructed and located within this paradigm, it also conjures up a body subject to
constant change or flux, a body that is never static, but always active, creative, and ‘mindful’. With respect to drag kinging, could this mean that ‘becoming’ drag king embodiment effectively alters, re-writes, or re-shapes the body of the woman embodying that becoming? Equally, it could also mean that the body – as mindful as it is sensual – (re)constitutes and transforms itself through incorporating, once again, those things thought to be incorporeal, such as the desires and fantasies for and of masculinity, together with the ‘signs’ and accoutrements of masculinity that women engage with through the forum of drag kinging (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 55).

Like the female drag king body, the drag king persona is constructed and enacted through different signs and artefacts of various masculinities and masculine ‘types’, which are then performed on the female body, yet the female body/self performing ‘him’ is intimately connected to, experienced and understood through and within this ‘dragged up’ body and drag king persona. There is no between-ness possible when endeavouring to differentiate the dragged up body from the notion of a ‘previous’ body that is experiencing this, and various drag narratives throughout the thesis highlight this. Although many drag king narratives discuss masculinity and drag king personas within postmodern notions of genders and identities – for instance, masculinity as a style that can be worn – the body/self engaging with them is never discussed within this paradigm. Whilst recognising and even promoting the constructed nature of gender and gender boundaries by sometimes mocking and parodying them, or through resisting conventional images of both masculinity and femininity, drag kings also engage with these constructions and boundaries in order to both effect and make meaning of drag king embodiment. Embodiment, or more precisely, drag king narratives of embodiment, resists being analysed through strictly postmodern theories of the body then, if only because postmodernist theories of the body, generally speaking, see the body as a performance or play of surfaces, and drag king narratives of the body continually emphasise corporeal and embodied responses to drag kinging.

The body, as discussed in drag king narratives, is obviously not considered ‘natural’ or fixed, but nor is it considered merely postmodern effect, representation or image. Rather, those narratives engage with the materiality of embodied existence as neither the exclusive result of discourse, or the cumulative effects of representation, nor as
simply the ‘other’ of representation, prior to it, or as a pre-discursive given, but as a complex negotiation within, with, and in excess of these divisions. I don’t wish to attempt to reconcile the apparently contradictory nature of those narratives; to do so would be to over-ride the voices of the drag kings. What is more important is to recognise how drag king embodiment is a corpor/real becoming – an ‘event of expression’ – and that the narratives employed by drag kings seek to confirm this (Bray and Colebrook 1998, 36). In this sense those narratives could be loosely understood within terms that understand both the body’s ‘becoming’, through various practices, comportments and articulations, and the interpretation and meaning of that ‘becoming’, as bodily events (37). In this case, embodiment is never anterior to interpretation, and interpretation never anterior to the body; on the contrary, they are aspects of ongoing practices of negotiation, reformation, and encounter (38). In addition, drag king narratives, as ways of thinking and speaking drag king embodiment, are replete with contradictions because embodiment, in this case, does indeed include complex negotiations and encounters with an almost endless variety of phenomena and experiences. This might include images, discourses, desires, dress, identifications, space, one’s own body, even other bodies, and none of these on their own could be said to ultimately determine embodiment or how it comes about (43).

Instead of aiming to resolve such contradictions, these narratives might be considered as being created through a type of Deleuzean ‘rhizomatic’ method, which does not begin from a distinction or hierarchy between cause and effect, mind and body, subject and expression, and so on, but rather from the idea that any point can form a beginning or point of connection for any other, and thus, the possibility of random and de-centred connections and creations, with the power of each point to transform another (Colebrook 2002, xxviii). In addition, no one ‘thing’ that goes into creating drag king embodiment can be employed to interpret or explain that embodiment definitively, because all those ‘things’ intermingle, transform and overlay each other to effect that embodiment and its articulation (xxviii). Further, any ‘thing’ that goes into creating or otherwise effecting drag king embodiment cannot be defined in itself, because any ‘thing’, in this case, gains profundity only through its relation to that which it helps to create. So, although masculinity can be authorised in drag king narratives within postmodern terms as styles and stereotypes to be adopted and discarded at whim, the embodied effects of engaging with them can be equally authorised within what could
almost be described as a type of oppositional humanism, especially when discussing that embodiment as an expression of one’s own inherent or ‘natural’ masculinity. Each narrative of drag king embodiment, in this case, selects and places individual value on two very different paradigms of thought, but does not seek to reconcile them, for as opposing paradigms – but, paradoxically, ones that are equally employed as constructions and discourses of the body – they necessarily overlap and coexist. Those narratives employ those paradigms for what they can do, for how they can work for the individual to create personal meaning and values, not as an ultimate foundation from which those narratives can emerge (xxxii).

The adoption of a Deleuzean rhizomatic method in order to better understand the narratives employed to explain the dynamics of drag king embodiment, serves to support my suspicion that that embodiment is defined and lived within what I would describe as organic and w/holistic terms. In many drag king narratives there is no clear or definite delineation or discrimination between the conditions and possibilities that produce drag king embodiment, and they are produced by drag kings to effect and make meaning of that embodiment. These conditions and possibilities are invested in and experienced at a social, psychological, corporeal and visceral level simultaneously, meaning drag king embodiment ‘becomes’ through a diverse and even contradictory number of ways, and the preceding drag king narratives, through thought, words, and speech, form one of those ways (xv).

In speculating on the embodied effects of drag kinging for women, I’ve been largely inspired by Kirby’s questioning of corporeality and her confrontational challenge to the easy dualisms that mark, and mark out, our lives, and Barad’s post-humanist elaboration of performativity, which allows ‘matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming’ (Barad 2003, 803). Cavallaro and Warwick’s analysis of the body/dress relationship reveals the resistance or refusal of the body or dress to clearly distinguish themselves from each other. What has particular impact, and influences those speculations, are their theoretical challenges to the supposed difference between the ‘immaterial’ and the ‘material’, which can be extended to the supposed difference between the metaphorical and the literal, or the sign and the body that is represented by the sign (Kirby 1997, 51). To this end, I argue for the effects of drag kinging as
fundamentally ‘organic’. Positioned within the metaphor of the möbius strip as previously re-contextualised, the effects of drag kinging result in what I have come to term ‘drag king embodiment’. That embodiment, I suggest, is simultaneously created through and is the product of many things. This includes personal desires and fantasies for and around masculinity, the accoutrements and signs of masculinity, one’s own sense of ‘inherent’ female masculinity or identifications with masculinity, and one’s drag king persona, as it is lived out and made meaningful at the intersection of the corporeal body, and one’s ‘female’ body and sense of ‘self’ as a sexed and gendered body within a patriarchal culture.

In effect, drag king embodiment emerges from and is the result of disparate and conventionally exclusive and ‘abstract’ experiences, ideas, and emotional investments, which are ‘fleshed’ out through the corporeal body. It is those disparate experiences, ideas and emotional investments as they act through the body that effects an altered sense of self, just as simultaneously that altered sense of self is itself acting through the body to effect the corporeal experience of drag king embodiment. Through varying theories of the body and my own speculations, I am fundamentally arguing for the very real effects of drag king embodiment within a w/holistic model, which does not draw distinctions between the psychical and sensual/corporeal experience of the body/self, but acknowledges their irreducibility. In addition, and as drag king narratives show, drag king embodiment also grants those women who practice it ‘an autonomous and active form of corporeal specificity’ (Grosz 1994, 14)
7. FANTASIES AND DESIRES IN THE KINGDOM: QUEER REFIGURINGS

…the terms fantasy and reality collapse into each other in a tangle of complicity.

- Rebecca Schneider
The Explicit Body in Performance (106)

Fantasy, both in literature and out of it, is an enormous and seductive subject. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the ‘value’ of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its ‘free-floating’ and escapist qualities.

- Rosemary Jackson
Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion (1)

Fantasy is, most importantly, an imaginary scene – a place for the staging of desire…. Its pleasures are the pleasures of mobility, of moving around among a range of different desiring positions.

- Linda Williams
Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film (15)

Sigmund Freud, the premier Mr. Id and Ego would have had a tough time explaining drag kings.

- Amy Linn
Drag Kings

7.1 Violation as Fantasy’s realisation

For me, kinging is a way to express the sides of myself that aren’t always encouraged in mainstream society: the boy, the actor, the activist, the porn star, the angsty poet who finds comfort in 80’s boy rock, the flirt.

- Rey Cruiter

Drag king culture provides not only a safe space for the public performance of cross-gender, cross-sex, cross-identity, and even cross-racial fantasies to be indulged in, embodied and celebrated, but more importantly allows for and foregrounds the female economy of desire that informs such subject positions. This chapter examines and promotes this female economy of desire by ‘skewing’ traditional theoretical models, which predominantly position desire within a logic of ‘lack and acquisition’, or as an
absence waiting to be fulfilled, and suggesting desire be better identified with ‘processes that produce’ – as a force of doing and making that doesn’t focus on intentions (meanings and purpose) but on effects (for their own sake) (Grosz 1995, 179-183). However, and paradoxically, it also admits to the impossibility of examining and theorising desire outside of dominant spheres of social power, and so it must be understood that desire is not necessarily in conflict with the dominant or prevailing culture, and therefore not automatically in direct conflict with traditional theoretical paradigms of the same. Perhaps it is better to say that this chapter ‘queers’ desire – a theoretical consideration provoked by the queer desires of the drag kings themselves – whilst also considering the role fantasy plays not only in the drag kingdom but also as it influences and enlightens those female desires. To this end, I resist analysing or discussing the meaning or significance of those fantasies and desires in order to somehow critique or ‘judge’ them, rather my intention is to offer theoretical considerations of both, and to promote them as a specifically female production solely in the service of female sexuality and eroticism. Although this may lead to accusations of being ‘apolitical’, this chapter, indeed this thesis, is not about discerning whether drag kinging is political – in any particular way – but more about resisting any imperative to do so.

First and foremost the desires and fantasies that are inherent in drag kinging and its attendant pleasures bear their ‘history’, and so theorising either of these means admitting that they are often informed by both the oppressive and permissive constructions and cultural mandates within which we all make sense of and live our world. For women and lesbians as part of the sexually oppressed, this means admitting that those desires and fantasies are often informed by the oppressive constructions we would willingly dispense with (Dollimore 1991, 325). Therefore, in examining the desires and fantasies, erotic or otherwise, that inform drag kinging, it will be necessary to dispense with the idea that desire and fantasy might somehow be above or outside the social, and consider both as informed by and constituted by the social. However, just because desire and fantasy are both informed and constituted by the social it does not necessarily mean they are wholly restricted or even inhibited by it; in fact the social makes available endless possibilities for desires and fantasies. As Rosemary Jackson suggests when writing about fantasy and its relation to the social:
Fantasy is not…transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different…. *A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility;* it is the … result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into ‘fact’ itself (1988, 8-14 my emphasis).

In Jackson’s model, fantasy is both produced within and determined by the social, if only in opposition *and* relation to, and thus cannot be comprehended in isolation from it. Further, according to Jackson, fantasy operates as a relation between the constraints against which it protests and from which it is created (3). Fantasy struggles against the limits of the social, in fact is often articulated upon that struggle, a dynamic I reflect on when discussing the formation and role of female fantasies and desires as they are played out in drag kinging and drag king culture (3).

In the above context, fantasies are both the result of cultural constraints but also a point at which, for a brief moment, such constraints are made vulnerable to disorder: to that which lies outside dominant social and value systems, outside of the ‘law’, but remaining inherent to it (4). For as Jackson writes: ‘[The] fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’’ (4). In this brief evaluation, the role, or more precisely the *structure* of fantasy rests on notions of it as a form of *compensation* and, in the words of Jackson, as ‘a literature of desire’ (3). Fantasy, she argues, makes up for something that is constructed and ostensibly experienced as absent or lost, or as *lacking*, as that which, when *openly expressed*, such as through a drag king performance, portrays, manifests or represents that desire – literally and publicly – whilst simultaneously *expelling* that which is made unseen, invisible or impossible: that which ‘threatens cultural order and continuity’ (3-4). This dynamic – expression as manifestation through to expression as expulsion – poses interesting questions when discussing the dynamics at play in drag king culture, largely because it appears to rest on the notion of expulsion as *redemption*, that is, redemption of the prevailing cultural/social order. Whilst expression through portrayal is necessarily achieved and understood within the language and laws of the dominant social and cultural order, it also, as Jackson argues, *tests* the limits of that order (4). Effectively, for the notion of ‘fantasy’ to be imagined and comprehended it must begin from a point *within* the dominant social order, must be ‘set against’ the
category of the ‘real’ as the ‘unreal’ so to speak (4). It is precisely this ‘testing’ of the limits of the dominant social order, played out as an irresolvable tension between subversion as disorder and an inescapable submission to ‘order’ in order to achieve this, which I suggest is one of the queer dynamics that informs the fantasies and desires that are played out in drag king culture.

Whilst Jackson’s preliminary discussion of fantasy seems to point to expression and expulsion as fulfilling some kind of continuum that possibly redeems the social order, teasing out that discussion also provokes the possibility of an irresolvable tension between transgression and redemption of the social order, an incompatible and complex relationship that I suggest provokes many of the pleasures, erotic or otherwise, of drag kinging. Further, I would argue that this particular dynamic also serves to create the possibility of a continuous and ongoing dialogue between the ‘limits’ of the cultural/social order and the ‘limitlessness’ of fantasy and desire. That limitlessness is not theorised here within terms of an endless and ultimately unsatisfying or insatiable yearning that sees one’s fantasies and desires as only vicariously fulfilled and therefore finally unfulfilled (a dynamic Jackson seems to promote), but rather one that opens up the possibility for a limitless exploration and continued affirmation of them, albeit, in this case, within the contextualised space of drag king culture.

The role of fantasy in drag king culture and to drag king culture is not, I would argue, based in an anarchic response to and subsequent attempt at a dissolution of governing social and cultural norms, particularly those governing female subjectivity and sexuality, but rather in an ongoing violation of them. Fantasy operates in drag king culture as a breach and violation of the ‘real’, even if the role of fantasy is to ostensibly deny the real (22). What fantasy both seeks and upholds is an irresolute distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘un-real’ in order that it may function as fantasy, and, in essence, as a refusal to close off or create limits on what can and can’t be imagined and what can and can’t be definitively determined within the real/unreal dialectic. Fantasy then, is located indeterminately between the real and the unreal, and could be considered as a liminal space. If there is a desire for ‘otherness’ in fantasy it is not directed or displaced into utopian or alternative ‘worlds’, but is directed towards the absent, impossible areas of this world. Fantasy, argues Jackson, ‘creates ‘alterity’, this world re-placed and dis-located’ (19). Fantasy is inextricably linked to the ‘real’, because it lies alongside the
real, making it irrefutably dependent on the real, but also threatening to it because of its ability to scrutinise, interrogate, and test the very category and limits of the real.

With regard to drag kinging, and in line with the arguments I have been developing throughout this thesis, drag king performances and embodiments of female masculinity force the ‘real’ to confront that which it traditionally refuses to entertain or encounter – what it considers ‘not there’, what cannot exist, but what it, paradoxically, must also construct as ‘unreal’ and therefore ‘there’. The role of fantasy in drag king culture is to play ‘the game of the impossible’ whilst, oxymoronically, being ‘controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility’ (Jackson 1988, 21). In the context of this argument, the ‘unreal’ is constantly present in the ‘real’, and in the context of how fantasy operates in drag king culture, the ‘real’ is constantly present in female fantasies by what the real must negate, by what cannot exist because it is constructed as contrary to and impossible (22). It is, I would argue, this cannot – for instance, in the form of the masculine woman and the phallicised dyke as both ‘there’ and desirable – that constitutes much of the queer pleasures, erotic and otherwise, of drag king culture. In performing, representing and finding desirable that which cannot be, but is, drag kings and drag king culture confront the limits of sociocultural and symbolic constructions of female subjectivity and desire, and the limits placed on both, by exposing and celebrating what lies ‘inside’, latent but always possible.

The pleasures of drag king culture lie in the exposure and celebration of precisely that which is constructed and known only through its absence and impossibility within the dominant ‘realistic’ order of symbolic and heterosexist law (25). However, the fantasies that inform and operate through performances of female masculinity are predicated on categories of the ‘real’ conceptualized only within negative terms according to those laws; they are performances of what is not permitted, and what is not possible, but performances that are created and represented through realistic means in order that they might violate the ‘real’. For instance, in drag king performances, female fantasies of and around masculinity establish their ‘reality’ by firstly presenting and manifesting themselves both mimetically and objectively. That is, those fantasies as drag king performances re/present masculinities (including female masculinity), in a ‘realistic’ sense, in so much as they are viewed and understood as representing and embodying masculinity.
As argued earlier in this thesis, masculinity would not be able to be performed were it not for at least a basic understanding of what masculinity ‘is’ or represents, or what it constitutes in any given society. Secondly, however, such presentations and manifestations are also viewed and understood as something seemingly impossible, as ‘unrealistic’, for female masculinity is an apparent oxymoron, is understood as impossible and ‘unreal’, were it not for its initial construction within the ‘real’ of symbolic and heterosexist law as ‘unreal’, and therefore, as a possibility (20). The performance of gay male figures and homosexual role play in drag king culture is another example of this perverse and paradoxical dynamic, doubly so, because it is played out against the context of both symbolic and cultural constructions of gay male subjectivity and sexuality and female subjectivity and sexuality.

As previously discussed in ‘Neither One nor the Other’, Bersani’s contentious theorising of gay male desire and its sustained idolisation of heterosexual ‘machismo’ highlights the gay man’s simultaneous identification with and violation of that which oppresses him, seduces him, and constitutes his desire. By suggesting that the gay man internalises what it is to ‘be a man’ in conjunction with cultural constructions that say he isn’t a ‘proper’ or ‘real’ one, and therefore can’t really ‘exist’, Bersani proposes that it is through his ‘mad’ identification with phallic masculinity and subsequent violation of it through homosexual identification with and desire for the same, that the gay man constructs and affirms both his identity and erotic life. Further, through willing subjection to and enjoyment of anal sex, gay men can further pervert heterosexual machismo by both desiring and dis-empowering it at the same time. By willingly shattering the ideal of the autonomous ‘masculine’ self by sublimating and violating that self through anal sex, gay men feel the thrill of violation on their own erotic terms. For Bersani, it is this violation, through the simultaneous desire for, identification with and sacrifice of that which oppresses and condemns one, that upholds this perverse dynamic.

In drag kinging, it is not uncommon for masculinities to be performed and represented as homosexual. In identifying with gay male masculinities and sexual role play, drag kings invest their female masculinity with homoerotic fantasies and desire. In this scenario, drag kings not only promote female desires that contradict rather than reiterate
dominant constructions of female sexuality, but also promote the anus as a site of libidinal desire, which detracts attention away from ‘proper’ masculinity and the penis as representative of ‘proper’ desire. Erotic identification with gay male sexuality violates on several levels, and it is perhaps for this reason that gay male masculinities and gay male role play are so popular as fantasies to explore through drag kinging and drag king culture. As previously discussed, when women perform, make desirable, and celebrate female masculinity, they do so through a complex and queer relationship with the heterosexist sociocultural and sociosexual limits placed on female subjectivity and sexuality, and the corresponding construction of the ‘impossible’ and ‘unthinkable’ feminine woman. Those constructions and the desires and fantasies that inform drag kinging are hopelessly entwined in a relationship based on a perverse complicity; neither can propose or confirm their ‘reality’ without acknowledgement, negated or admitted, of the other’s existence and its influence on the construction of that reality.

Constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality rely on, but also make possible, identification with that which must be negated. Drag kinging, in turn, wields the ‘master’s tools’ against the ‘master’s house’, forcing not only a critical look at the terms and limits of those constructions, but also, paradoxically, seeking authorisation and agency relative to those constructions as they shadow or ‘ghost’ the performance of female masculinity (Schneider 1997, 105). Perhaps the fantasy of gay male sexuality allows for a more explicit performance of queer female sexual and erotic desires within drag king culture, because it doubly violates traditional constructions of masculine and feminine subjectivity. Not only does it appropriate across gender lines – performing as a drag king who performs gay masculinities, desiring a ‘fellow’ drag king, simulating anal sex, grabbing at crotches – but it also wrests phallic virility away from its usual status as heterosexual and masculine. Anal sex is antithetical to ‘proper’ masculinity and grabbing at one’s crotch or another’s centres the eroticism of that gesture onto female genitalia – because we know it is a woman underneath the masculine clothes and accoutrements, and we know this is a performance of female masculinity. The erotic nature of the performance does not lie in the correlation of a ‘hidden’ penis/phallus as representative of such active female desires – a correlation that Schneider reminds us is a sociocultural given – but in taking the phallus and regarding it in violation of its dominant sociocultural position (106). There is no denial of the penis/phallus conflation, or its positioning within heterosexual culture, or even the sociocultural given
that active desire and erotic pleasure can only be represented by the erect penis, but rather acknowledgment in the form of *knowingly violating its position and authority.* This becomes a multiple violation registered through the attachment of the penis/phallus to the female crotch, the autoerotic gesture of grabbing at one’s own crotch as an expression of active female sexuality and desire, and the simultaneous disempowerment of the penis/phallus through adoption of the anus as both a fetish object substitute for it and as a receptacle that can be fucked by it.

Like Bersani’s analysis of gay male identity and sexuality and the perverse dynamics that inform these, drag kinging’s desires and fantasies around gay masculinities involves an equally complex and perverse negotiation with the sociocultural constructions that seek to structure and control female subjectivity and sexuality. It is through violation as fantasy’s realisation that erotic and other desires are played out as both visual spectacle and embodied experience in drag king culture. Violation in this case is dependent on a relationship centred on desire for, identification with, and sacrifice of that which both constructs and condemns the self, and which also renders that self unthinkable and impossible by constructing the self as such. In this context, violation is only possible as fantasy’s realisation if it is ‘real/ised’ as a violation, both by the violated and violator, again, a complicit and mutually constitutive relationship, albeit strangely perverse. To engage in drag kinging and gay male role play as fantasies realised, is to simultaneously erotically identify with both heterosexual or ‘proper’ masculinity and femininity and with the abject (for female masculinity and male homosexuality cannot ‘be’, are only ‘there’ by negation from what ‘is’, what is ‘proper’), and to desire violation of this contradictory subject position through erotic assassination of it, in terms of objectifying as spectacle the abject, which in turn only makes sense as what ‘isn’t’, what is impossible, in relation to what ‘is’ and what can ‘be’. Violation is a tricky business.

It is this contradictory and disorientating relationship that forms the ‘reality’ of fantasy and how it functions within drag king culture. It is a dynamic loosely based on what Jackson terms a ‘negative relationality’, in so much as it is predicated on what is named as impossible, unreal, unthinkable, but what is asserted through conventional forms of representation as possible, real, and therefore thinkable, only to then proceed to break that assumption of realism by making manifest what, within the preceding terms, is
named as ‘manifestly unreal’ (Jackson 1988, 34). Structured upon ambiguity, contradiction, oscillation as a form of liminality, and a reluctance to be clearly defined or confined, fantasy, as it operates in drag king culture, draws attention to its own practice as a queer female system of desire created out of that which cannot ‘be’, but which must be named as so, and thus, becomes open to violation and queer female appropriation and interpretation.

Violation as it is played out in drag king performances and drag king culture is both a site of interruption and connection, but with no wish for integration. However, that violation, paradoxically, still remains within the limits of patriarchal and heterosexual models of female subjectivity even as it subverts the stability and ‘truth’ of those models – it must, or it could not be imagined and engaged in – so, it is not inherently transgressive (no fantasy, desire or violation is), but rather is better theorized as a (perverse) recuperation of those models to a queer female erotic, and further, as an erotic ‘aberration’ un-assimilable to dominant ideals, norms and constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality (Grosz 1995, 181). It is, at heart, a production both arising from and of queer female desires in the service of queer female subjectivity and sexuality, and, in line with previous discussions of queer agency, remains an essentially Camp practice.

To position the queer desires of drag kings and drag king culture within traditional models of desire as forever insatiable, never fully satisfied or never fully met, or within a logic of lack where desire only functions if it remains unfulfilled, is to seriously underrate active female desires and their provocative effects. Further, to see these desires as operating in a space between what one has or has not got (namely, the phallus), and what one wants, is reductive and heterosexist. To theorise desire as it operates in drag king culture as anything other than spirited, productive and purposely resistant to any one site of satiation is to seriously undermine it. To theorise desire within these terms is to resist the affirmation and primacy of one particular configuration of desire, and to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and perversity of all female desires as they operate in drag king culture.
7.2 Writing female desire: desires in action.

Kinging affords me all kinds of freedom. The freedom to perform, to do and say things I
wouldn’t normally say. To desire and be desired by those I wouldn’t normally desire or be
desired by.

- Melanie aka ‘Jake Dangar’

Desire need not culminate in sexual intercourse, but may end in production. Not the production
of a child or relationship, but the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought,
energies never tapped, regions never known.

- Elizabeth Grosz

*Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (205)

The psychoanalytic critic is she [sic] who cannot bear to be moved without knowing why,
cannot bear to be overwhelmed, and would counter the object’s power with her understanding.

- Jane Gallop

*Thinking Through the Body* (139)

[t]he world (continuity and distinction) is an outright fiction of the imagination.

- Gilles Deleuze

*Gilles Deleuze* (3)

In theorising the female desires that circulate within drag king culture, or more
specifically, in my efforts to theorise the notion of female desire itself, I am both
challenged and restricted by the prevailing debt to and employment of a psychoanalytic
approach to desire in both understanding it and constructing it. Whilst I freely admit that
any alternative theoretical method is naturally indebted to prevailing models that
theorise desire, if only by refusing to employ them, I am also seeking to make
experimental excursions into the nature of female desire and how it might operate in
and through drag king culture (particularly the relations between dress and flesh as an
example of this). I want to resist ‘falling back’ on psychoanalytic discourses to do this,
but acknowledge that this may ultimately be impossible in light of their appropriation
and revisionist use by some important theorists (De Lauretis and Irigaray, for example),
whose work it is difficult to ignore in the process of re/thinking desire. Rather, it may be
best to suggest I inadvertently queer them in my effort to promote female desire(s) over
and above the dominant masculinist and hence heterosexist theories of desire that
prevail in psychoanalysis, in particular the notion of desire as lack and the negative connotations that ultimately follow from this, namely that lack equals the feminine.

In addition, and borrowing heavily from specific Deleuzean theoretical concepts and Elizabeth Grosz’s experimental writing on desire, both of which I outline below, my theorising resists any formal analysis of desire and instead seeks to promote desire’s mutability, innovativeness and experimentalist nature, and further, an ‘erotics of engagement’, which promotes the eroticism and arousal of desire as present in and through an encounter, through experience, rather than in the object (Gallop 1988, 138). I may covertly employ psychoanalytic approaches to theorising desire, if only in order to ‘twist’ and manipulate them as both a background and contrast to the experimental theoretical excursions I make into thinking and writing about the female desires that affect and are effected by the women who engage in drag kinging, and that circulate in drag king culture. Such excursions are made in order to better understand and thus appreciate, celebrate, and promote the female desires of drag king culture, for as Gallop so rightly suggests, ‘[t]he appreciator who pretends she has no need to understand is denying what is overwhelming, frighteningly powerful, in what moves her’ (140). However, in saying this I do not consciously attempt to locate those desires within any one theoretical paradigm in order to force them to submit to or be possessed by it, but I do admit I am in some way possibly contributing to the cooption, diminution and corruption of something inherently complex, intimate, powerful and deeply personal.

Far from offering a utopian view of desire, or one grounded and thus limited by the social, Grosz maintains that desire is both constituted by and constitutive of the social. Effectively, desires function and are provoked and effected within the constraints of heterosexism and phallocentrism, but as Grosz reminds us, ‘this indeed is the condition of any effective transgression of them’, and of course any erotic violation of them (Grosz 1995, 174). How to think and conceive of ‘desire’ beyond dominant theoretical conceptions of it, meaning within exclusively masculine and thus heterocentric terms, is a challenge I share with Grosz (175). Within these terms desire has for the most part functioned through the covert exclusion of women. As Grosz queries, how can such a concept be dramatically ‘stretched’ to include as subject what has always been identified and positioned as object? (175) In addition, desire has been almost exclusively defined within a logic of lack, a lack that must be fulfilled and yet remain
elusively always wanting for more (as if wanting for more must always, in itself, be a non-desirable state). Desire’s object within this paradigm, is, argues Grosz, ‘always another desire’, and the ‘only object desire can desire is one that will not fill the lack or provide complete satisfaction…. Thus … the only object that both satisfies desire and perpetuates it is not an object but another desire. The desire of the other is thus the only appropriate object of desire’ (176). It is this conception of desire that haunts and dominates theoretical explorations of desire – the perpetually absent ‘other’. As Grosz convincingly argues, the notion of desire as ‘an absence, lack, or hole, an abyss seeking to be engulfed, stuffed to satisfaction’ naturally sexualises desire, ‘coding it in terms of the prevailing characteristics attributed to the masculine/feminine opposition – presence and absence’ (177). Desire, like corresponding theories of female sexuality, is understood here as ‘insatiable, boundless, relentless, a gaping hole’ that can only be temporarily filled (177). Desire, writes Grosz, ‘suffers an inherent dependence on its object’, and thus, is fundamentally incomplete without it (177).

It should be clear by now that within these terms desire is modelled on a sexual polarity, and further, where desire is coded within negative terms, it is not surprising, Grosz writes, that it ‘becomes coded in similar terms to those attributed to femininity’ (177). In addition, argues Grosz, where desire is based on this model of lack, yearning and endless seeking, ‘but is never capable of finding itself and its equilibrium’, such models enable ‘the two sexes to be understood as (biological, sexual, social and psychical) complements of each other – each is presumed to complete, to fill up, the lack of the other’ (177). Such a model, argues Grosz, refuses to acknowledge or consider the autonomy of either sex, ‘particularly the autonomy of women’, and further, ‘feminizes, heterosexualizes and binarizes desire at an ontological and epistemological level’ (177).

This model of desire is sustained through and by psychoanalytic accounts of desire, notably Freud’s, with the exception that because desire is theorised as inherently masculine – according to Freud desire is considered an ‘activity’ and active desire is always correlated with masculinity – the notion of female desire becomes self-contradictory (Grosz 1995,178). Psychoanalytic models of desire get around this conundrum by suggesting that the ‘normal’ heterosexual woman must relinquish the ‘masculine’, ‘phallic’ desire to love and substitute it with the ‘passive aim of being loved and desired’ (177). To refuse this position, to maintain an active relation to desire,
is to be accused of a ‘masculinity complex’, to refuse ‘proper’ femininity, and to refuse
to ‘be a woman’. The desiring woman in this model becomes an oxymoron, for in this
model one can only love and desire as a man, not as a woman (178). In psychoanalytic
accounts of desire, woman is always and can only ever occupy the position of the object
of desire, never the subject who desires, for to be the subject who desires is to renounce
one’s ‘woman-ness’. The impossibility of psychoanalytic models of desire ever
adequately or implicitly offering terms within which female desire can be analysed or
‘thought’, makes such models completely inadequate for understanding or even
speculating on female desire, particularly desire as it operates in drag king culture.
Further, the ‘circuits of exchange’ that govern desire, not the so called ‘object(s)’ that
desire may attach itself to, are inherently homosexual; that is, desire is governed by
phallocentricism; it is ‘governed and regulated with respect to the phallus’ and hence, is
for and between men (179).

Whilst it may be possible to queer such models to speculate on female desires as they
are conceived of and operate in drag king culture, it also makes glaringly obvious that
thinking female desire outside these models is a challenge, not least because the concept
of female desire has never been afforded the status of an activity in its own right. As
Grosz reminds us, ‘women function (for men) as objects of desire’ not as subjects of
desire, and so any conception of female desire founded on prevailing heterosexist
models, which attribute to desire the status of an activity (with ‘activity’, in this context,
being dependent on possession of the penis/phallus), are going to be grossly inadequate
(179).

Like Grosz, the first step to thinking and arguing for desire, particularly female desire,
outside and in rejection of heterosexist models, is to resist approaching it from within
terms of a lack. Desire, writes Claire Colebrook, ‘does not begin from lack – desiring
what we do not have. Desire begins from connection’ (Colebrook 2002, 240 my
emphasis). Within this context we might begin to imagine how desires may connect
with other desires as a production that continually expands desire’s creation and
creativity, and rather than viewing these connections within a traditional paradigm of
desire merely longing for desires in a never-ending perpetuation of yearning and
unsatisfactory substitution, we might imagine those connections as becomings and
therefore productive. ‘Becomings’ in this context is borrowed from the Deleuzean
concept, which promotes the idea of the non-static, constantly mutating flow of all organic life and non-organic life as they intersect, connect and traverse, and enhance, alter, and transform each other to produce new becomings, and what Deleuze calls, ‘lines of flight’ (133). Those ‘lines of flight’ are not, Deleuze argues, the becoming of some being, but rather is as something dependant on what is encountered; becoming is not restricted to actualisation but is based in perceptions and their effects (for becoming is without ground or foundation). Any ‘actual’ world or thing is a composite of perceptions, how we perceive it, and perception of anything in ‘actual’ form is the result of ‘virtual tendencies’, how the human eye might see it, the ear hear it, the mind imagine or think it, and touch interpret it (126). In this case, Deleuzean concepts of becoming recognise that there is more than the actual world, there are also potential worlds we might also see, hear, think or ‘feel’, and further, to take anything as actual requires, no less, the ‘virtual synthesis’ of time; in actualising things, we rely on retention, on memories of past perceptions, and anticipation and connection of future perceptions (127). For example, Colebrook writes:

I can perceive this thing as red only with reference to past perception, which allows me to recognise this perception as red. I can also anticipate further instances and variations of this red that are not yet present; our perceived present has this virtual halo of what is not present but is no less real (127).

Perception, what we perceive and actualise, also includes what we recall, anticipate, and can imagine; it is not confined to the present (although it is a moment of becoming), but is also possibility, and further, what is perceived is always open to what it is not yet. Therefore, not only ‘is the actual world expanded by a virtual plane of potential, there is also a virtual dimension at the heart of any actual perception’ (126). We ‘become’ and become other through confrontation with myriad ‘forces’ which compose and engage with us, and in this way we are, as Deleuze explains it, one with the flow of life; that is, we are not set over and against life as ‘original’ subjects of a world that then becomes, or that underlies becoming, rather there is nothing but ‘becoming-life’, and we – in fact, all things – are but a moment in the flow of this becoming-life (125).

Deleuze’s groundless concept of ‘becoming’ offers the theorist of desire (and its manifestation in drag king performances) great freedom to extol the power of perception as effect, expressed, in this context, as the very bodily perception and
materialisation of those desires (this now becomes evident if we reflect back on ‘Embodied Acts’ and what it argued for). From the line of thinking promoted by Deleuze we can begin to imagine the very real possibility of actualising perception into effect, or more succinctly, that effect is perception actualised, and that perception of effect is not tied to some transcendent reality, but is a becoming-life and a becoming-other. Through adopting a Deleuzean ‘frame of mind’, we no longer have to see anything of our world from a partial, judgemental perspective, that is, enslaved by a perspective that seeks interpretation, hidden symbolism, sense, or a ‘position of opinion’, for example. Rather, we are afforded the freedom to not be limited by the finite, by the supposed ‘order of things’; we are ‘allowed’ to resist and ignore any given, or ‘once and for all’, and become radical in the way we think or theorise desire (149).

If we destroy, theoretically, the border between perceiver and perceived, between subject and the self, and what we think, know or recognise from a ‘common sense’ viewpoint, we are no longer placed in a position of ordering or ordered judgement; that is, we can be liberated from finite self-images and by a ‘fixed image of thought’ (131). For example, it is only from perceiving myself as separate, static and disengaged from what I perceive, that I can make a judgement, that is, a reactive judgement. Judgement based on this premise is an essentially active choice – I affirm this, I reject that – presented and realised reactively through a set of predetermined and immutable values: this is valid, or this is not valid (131). A Deleuzean concept of becoming abandons any finite position, stance or judgement, and expands perception beyond the ‘located point of view’ of judgement as we traditionally comprehend and employ it (130). We would be wise to remember this when we consider a sock is not just a sock when it becomes a cock, for, ‘in a world of becoming what something ‘is’ is always open to what it is not yet’ (126).

As argued previously in ‘Embodied Acts’, a sock effects, brings into being, the embodiment of a cock – Alana’s sock becomes different, becomes other, through and how it is perceived by Alana as a cock, and Alana becomes different, not through perceiving or judging what is other to the self – the sock – but in transforming herself through perceiving the difference (becoming other) in herself when she embodies the sock as a cock. Alana no longer acts as a separate self or point within a traditional system of perception that would judge what constitutes – or is merely – a sock, but
rather becomes different with, and through, what is perceived: a sock as a cock (Colebrook 2002, 133). The example of Alana’s becoming parallels somewhat Deleuze’s ‘becoming-animal’, where becoming-animal is not becoming like an animal, or being an animal and departing from the realm of the human completely, but rather is an expansion of perception that enables one to transform oneself through perceiving difference in an encounter from no fixed or pre-given standpoint; it is ironically and beautifully described as, ‘using the human power of imagination to overcome the human’ (129). That is, in Alana’s case the sock is perceived in its singularity, but not merely as a symbol or signifier of a foot covering, but as something with its own power to become other, and correspondingly, Alana’s encounter with the sock produces its own or another becoming – she has and feels a cock; in Deleuzean terms this is a ‘transversal becoming’, an event that comes about through the combination of these becomings, an event intended neither by the sock (obviously) or Alana (133). From a Deleuzean viewpoint, this becoming would represent an expansion of perception that is open to life, or is ‘becoming-life’. Claire Colebrook writes:

> We enhance our life or power by ‘mutating’ or ‘varying’ in as many ways as possible, through a maximum of encounters. We limit our life by restricting our becomings (through pre-given moral codes and norms). The human may have its own tendencies of becoming (such as consciousness, memory, writing and so on) but it can also expand its perception to encounter other becomings, such as becoming-animal (133).

Alana’s sock-cock, and the experience, erotic or otherwise that it provokes and affects, is not, within a Deleuzean theoretical framework, a becoming traceable to a concealed or ‘lost origin’ that is displaced, in the manner of Freud’s oedipal drama; nor should it be interpreted or read as the signifier of some original scene (134). Alana’s experience is not affected through a desire to possess or recover some ‘lost’ object, or more importantly, through what she ‘lacks’; it is a becoming or becoming-other through what is more than oneself, a fine line to argue, but nonetheless important when stepping out of any psychoanalytic mode of interpretation (135). Within a Deleuzean context, Alana’s experience is but another, different mode of perception or becoming. In perceiving herself as having a cock, Alana also perceives herself differently, and in so doing transforms herself, not towards some goal of replicating a ‘man’, or recovering something ‘lost’, but as a transformation with no fixed point of reference: an ‘action’ with no beginning or end, a transformation ‘read’ for the effects it produces (135).
I have borrowed very specifically from Deleuzean theories (and Guattari must also be acknowledged here), in an attempt to break out of and oppose strictly psychoanalytic frameworks for theorising desire, especially how it is expressed and produced in drag king culture. Alana’s experience of her sock-cock is a wonderful example of desire as **productive**, in the sense that desire is expressed through transformation which is a result of ‘becoming-other’ through what is more than oneself (Deleuze also describes this as ‘becoming-hybrid’), rather than what one lacks or has lost (129). Further, it is a becoming that is not confined to or directed towards an ‘end’ or satiated state (in true psychoanalytic terms that would be before all desire and difference), but rather is an expansion of life, or as Deleuze describes it, a becoming-life. In addition, perception, in Deleuzean terms, grants us the freedom to transform ourselves, not through conquering what is other to the self, but in perceiving difference in the self through an encounter with an anomaly (a sock as a cock, or equally, drawn on moustaches and sideburns that affect ‘real’ facial hair), in resisting sense or comprehension as we traditionally understand and employ it, and producing and allowing new perceptions, and thus, ‘new worlds’ (137).

Instead of imagining desire as directed towards repossessing what is lost or possessing what one lacks, desire, in Deleuzean terms, is always positive and productive and is not limited to specific objects or fulfilments (141). In addition, desire is not restricted to or reducible to sexual relations between persons, but rather, the very idea of ‘persons’ is created through the organisation of desire. Bodies become ‘persons’ through a relation to other bodies, and the challenge of Deleuzean theories of desire, in opposition to psychoanalytic theories and ‘common sense’, ‘is the idea that life and desire do not begin from bounded organisms’, but rather that there is a ‘flow of life’ which passes through and across bodies (141-2). For Deleuze this ‘flow of life’ is not organised into bodies; bodies, he suggests, are formed from investments, from ‘the active and ongoing interactions of becomings’ (142). Whilst psychoanalysis insists on the bounded individual and his/her desire and aim to return to his/her ‘original quiescent state, prior to the disruption of desire’, Deleuzean concepts of life and desire do not begin from any fixed or original point: ‘life has no original closed state’; there is only a surplus of life which we may choose to suppress or hope to contain (142). Claire Colebrook elaborates on this further:
Not only is desire pre-personal, beginning from connections between body-parts; desire is also pre-human. Life, as we have said, is a flow of desire. Human beings, as *extended bodies* who recognise themselves as subjects, must repress the flow or genesis that passes through them. We repress, then, not because there are objects that are denied us…. We repress because of the *excess* of life; we are always more than the closed image of the self we take ourselves to be. The forces of life exceed the simple actual bodies we perceive; we repress the excess, violence and disruption of life – the creative force that transgresses the boundaries of persons or intentions (142).

To explain desire within terms of an original desire for the impossible or prohibited (that being, in oedipal terms, the mother), and thus within terms of loss, lack, or repression, suppresses, according to Deleuzean theory, a ‘more radical and revolutionary desire and sexuality’ (Colebrook 2002, 142). In psychoanalytic terms ‘[s]exuality, desire and becoming are interpreted as human: as a relation between man [sic] and his biological origin’ (142). In opposition to this account of ‘desire from bodies, Colebrook describes a desire that produces and exceeds bodies. Paraphrasing Deleuze, she writes: ‘desire is free flow, creative difference and becoming’ (Colebrook 2002, 142). Deleuzean theories of desire argue that sexuality, becoming and difference need to be thought ‘*anti-oedipally*’, that is, against the idea of repression of desire for the mother, and against the renunciation of that desire in order that we become ‘human’ and social; for in these terms woman is produced as ‘an impossible, lost and prohibited origin – as what must be repressed and excluded in order for human history to begin’, and, consequently what we must repress or exclude in order for desire to begin ‘properly’ (143).

Desire, in Deleuzean terms, does not begin from *anywhere*, especially not from the repression, prohibition, or loss of an original object (the mother). For Deleuze the oedipal fantasy is a construct designed to repress an understanding of desire as a ‘flow of connection, production and ever more complex differentiation’ (Colebrook 2002, 143). To think desire within these radical terms is to reject the notion of ‘man’ as produced through the repression and prohibition of woman or the mother, to reject man as the ‘other’ of woman, and to reject a law that tells us what we must want through what must be prohibited or repressed. Further, to consider Deleuze’s radical concept of desire as desire that traverses the body, rather than desire being of or from the body of ‘man’, is to imagine desire as ‘pre-personal, anti-oedipal and directly revolutionary’
Desire, for Deleuze then, is not ‘explained from within the story of man or human history’, but ‘is a desire radically other than man and his negation of life’ (143). In refusing to theorise or understand desire within negative terms, and understanding desire as ‘becoming other than man’, and, more specifically, by promoting becoming and desire freed from any ‘norm’ or end, Deleuze asks us to consider ourselves as created and effected from such becomings and desires, and further, to be open to the possibility of further becomings and desires over and beyond the ‘story of man’ (145).

Adopting Deleuzean theories of desire or thinking, and valuing desire within Deleuzean terms, radically liberates the theorist of desire from prevailing laws and norms, which predominantly see, think and understand desire as expressive of some pre-determined consciousness or as some aberration of it. Desire, as I want to see, think and understand it within the context of drag king culture, is always productive, active and creative, and taking my cue from Elizabeth Grosz, this does not mean having to faithfully follow all of Deleuze’s (and his collaborative works with Guattari) philosophical works to do so. In fact, it was never Deleuze’s goal that theorists faithfully adopt his philosophies, but rather, that we could employ them as new ways of seeing and saying in our own right. Following this, the Deleuzean proposition – ‘why should we accept conventions, norms and values? What stops us from creating new values, new desires, or new images of what it is to be and think?’ – affords me, and the drag kings, a truly liberatory position from which to see, think, value, and speak desire (Colebrook 2002, 5).

Elizabeth Grosz experiments with Deleuzean concepts in order to imagine and (re)think lesbianism and lesbian desire, and her experimentalism largely inspires my own speculations on desire as I see it operating within drag king culture (Grosz 1995, 173-175). Far from offering any utopian or goal oriented vision, such speculations, much like Grosz’s experimentalist writing, offer a ‘way of looking’ that resists any hierarchical relations between any associations. For instance, I do not privilege the human, or organic, over the non-human, or non-organic, as they traverse each other and transmute into some/thing. I do not pre-suppose that desire(s) must originate from or be structured by any sub-conscious ‘goal’, or that any investment of libido in that desire is always inherently a substitute for what one cannot have – the perpetually lost, absent or forbidden object. Desire, as I want to think, see and value it, resists being a ‘thing’, resists being forced to aspire to ‘be’. Desire, in this context then, eschews any attempts
at totality, any definitive trajectory, and revels in specifics, momentary, provisional, and always inherently unstable and subject to change (184). Just like Deleuze’s notion of ‘becoming’, desire connects with and becomes bound up with other desires in a movement of production that resists or defies a logic of purpose or determined signification, for as Grosz so eloquently writes: ‘one often cannot say or know what it is that entices and.allures, a gesture, a movement, a posture or look, which becomes loaded with more affect and impetus than is required to explain it’ (195). In this context, desire is restless; it has no objective or intent but is more about intensities, about an investment of libido that is not innate or pre-given, but is creative, active and productive without having to be purposeful. ‘Intensities’, as Grosz describes them, may be those moments of conjunction, interruption and connection – ‘an intimacy of encounter’ – between, for instance, skin and items of clothing, or skin, clothing and posturing, where there is not comprehension or investment in these ‘things’ as separate entities, but rather, in their coming together which affects pleasures (or, equally, displeasure) (182). It is this coming together for its own sake that Grosz emphasises; she makes no distinction between the organic or non-organic, promoting instead the interface between parts (of bodies) and (body) things: ‘the coming together of two surfaces produces a tracing that imbues eros [desire] or libido to both of them’ (182). It is such encounters that produce ‘erotogenic’ surfaces, inscribe the body’s surface, and produce intensities that are not innate or pre-given, but are more about being relative to one another, or as an extension of one another with no aim other than to proliferate further intensities or becomings: ‘[t]hey transform themselves, undergo metamorphoses, become something else, never retain an identity or purpose’ (183). Grosz uses the example of Mary Fallon’s postmodern writing to illustrate the significance of this understanding of desire as intensities, intensities as becomings, and becomings as creations and productions:

…stroking my whole body all night long until your fingers become fine sprays of white flowers until they became fine silver wires electrifying my epidermis until they became delicate instruments of torture… (Fallon in Grosz 1995, 184).

Fingers become flowers, become silver, become torture instruments: ‘[o]ne ‘thing’ transmutes into another, becomes something else through its connections with something or someone outside’ (184). This can be equally applied not only to Alana’s sock-cock, but to the many encounters between dress and flesh in drag king culture; a
hat and chaps makes a swaggering cowboy crooner, pencil lines make facial hair, facial hair makes a hot Latin lover, a well made suit makes a big, powerful ‘man’. Desire, played out in drag king performances, is about relations between ‘things’ as interactive, creating intensities, equally provocative and unpredictable, of making and understanding provisional connections that are not reducible to any one thing, and of being swept along with and beside these connections with no attempt to contain or define them outside of their value as productive of desire and pleasure. Desire, in these terms, resists being founded or grounded in anything other than processes of becoming, and any relations between ‘things’ – dress and flesh – in the service of that desire is a (non-hierarchical) interaction of differences that have the power to transform each other. Desire is not identified with the attainment of and subsequent satisfaction from an object or objects then, but ‘with processes that produce’, which resist or deny any definitive objective, purpose or identity (179). Desire as production then, as ‘pure positivity’, is not goal orientated, nor does it structure or reduce desire to a singular signifier (179). Desire has no models, maxims or grounds; desire has no aspirations or latent depth. Desire is productive but not usually reproductive. Desire has no other function but its own expansion and proliferation. Desire is nomadic, ‘unfettered by anything external, for anything can form part of its circuit, can be absorbed into its operation’ (183). Ultimately desire is a production that makes but produces no/thing (183).

7.3 Judging the limits of desire?

It is also testimony to the vitality and fluidity of desire that it so easily appropriates whatever channels are available to it.

- Deborah Bright

*Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs* (152)

The bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are part of the intensity and passion of life itself.

- Elizabeth Grosz

*Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (181)

As the preceding discussion promotes, desire is theorised as dynamic, active, responsive and resistant to any model that would seek to ‘tie’ it down. In contrast to psychoanalytic models, Deleuzean concepts of desire or desire’s production(s) permit the desires of
drag kings to exist solely for the pleasures they provide or elicit, and in this respect, those desires remain resistant to any politicisation or psychological evaluation. More importantly, desire conceived through such concepts remains liberated from heterosexist and patriarchal models of proper and appropriate desire, if only because such concepts are not constrained or limited by these models, although they may certainly be a reaction to – not against – them. In this respect, desire, as it is theorised in Deleuzean terms and as it operates within drag king culture, could be loosely described as queer or Camp modes of desire, in so much as that desire is ever resourceful, creative, ingenious, and continuously developing from a position of, if not oppression, then at least subordination to traditional psychoanalytic models of desire. More specifically, any theoretical attempt at speculating on the queer female desires of drag kings and drag king culture will naturally want to resist models of desire that rely on the dominant heterosexual fantasy of opposition or complementarity between the sexes, which is employed as a foundation from which to approach theorising desire and any perceived aberration of desire or desire’s goal. In addition, such theories remain focused on concepts of the psyche, its motives, fantasies, and intentions, whilst simultaneously examining these for any corresponding meaning or significance they may provide in terms of conceiving of and explaining that psyche; in other words, psychoanalytic approaches focus on the subject strictly in terms of ‘interiority’.

Deleuzean concepts of desire however, tend to privilege ‘the erotogenic surface’, that is, the body’s ‘outside’, as both a site for the perception of the erotic – as a phenomenological experience acknowledged – and also for ‘the inscription and intensification of the sensitivity of bodily regions’ (Grosz 1995, 197). Carnal desire, suggests Grosz, does not operate through a ‘vertical’ relation between bodily surface and psyche, but rather in terms of interaction and contamination of one bodily surface by another (197). Grosz cites and elaborates on Alphonso Lingis’s philosophical writings on bodily pleasures, lust, and sexuality to promote this insistence on the importance of bodily surfaces over and above any ‘supervising consciousness’, with regard to carnality, the carnal, and desire’s corporeal intensifications (197). Grosz adopts Lingis’s materialist approach to analyses of sexuality and sexual desire by identifying the orgasmic body, for instance, as an interference and displacement of the organic ‘body of nature’ (197). Focus is shifted from the body in totality – that is the body as ‘a subject’ (as prescribed by psychoanalytic positions), to the body as zones or
regions, or ‘sites of intensity’ whereby any excitation of the body’s surface will prefer or privilege some bodily regions over another (197):

The intensification of one bodily region or zone induces an increase in the excitation of those contiguous with it. Significantly, the two or more interacting zones or regions need not be part of the one body but may come from different bodies and different substances. Their relations cannot be understood in terms of complementarity, the one completing the other … for there can be no constitution of a totality, union, or merger of the two [in psychoanalytic terms]. Each remains in its site, functioning in its own ways (197).

This approach does not seek to ‘desegment’ the body; on the contrary, it recognises the organic body as ‘itself a product of the organization and hierarchization of localized and particular libidinal zones’ (199). In these terms the organic, unified body is always provisionally complete, for its libidinal zones or regions are continually intervening in both the functioning of the body and the body image (199).

This theoretical approach to carnality and carnal desires is in direct opposition to psychoanalytic positions, which would see such a multiplicity of libidinal sites within terms of regression and pre-oedipal nostalgia. Grosz’s proposition, however, provides a wonderful theoretical ‘escape’ from psychoanalytic positions, and is especially valuable for speculating on desire and its carnal and other incarnations in drag king culture as potentially limitless – a limitlessness that recalls not only previous discussions on the role of fantasy in drag king culture and its refusal to create limits on what can and can’t be imagined, or what can and can’t be determined within a real/unreal dialectic, but also much earlier discussions on the flexible nature of bodily existence, its potential boundlessness, and its unlimited potential for redefining itself (see ‘And the Dress was made Flesh’).

The role of dress and flesh collaborations in drag king culture as erotic and carnal encounters par excellence cannot be underestimated. As discussed in ‘Embodied Acts’, dress, acknowledged as all those accoutrements employed by drag kings to affect masculinity, plays an equally powerful role in the potentially endless creation, production and embodiment of desires, as does the body engaging with dress. This encounter involves the coming together of ostensibly disparate surfaces, yet their
juxtaposition against and interaction with one another produces an intensification of both, for they are transformed and ‘dis-organised’ through ‘being thrown into an interchange with an other whose surface intersects one’s own’; each erupts into the other and accordingly interrupts the apparent unity of both as separate and definitively defined ‘worlds’. In the case of drag kinging, this could be one’s flesh and something as simple as a sock or drawn on moustache (Grosz 1995, 200). As Grosz so passionately suggests, the point is that both a body and world ‘are opened up to redistribution …each is metamorphosed in the encounter, both become something other; something incapable of being determined in advance, and perhaps even in retrospect’ – the problem of retrospection borne out by the difficulty many women have in succinctly articulating their encounters with drag kinging – ‘but which nonetheless have perceptibly shifted and realigned’ (200). Such encounters, as essentially immediate and indeterminate, can provoke a powerful and sensuous troubling of one’s body as a supposed organic whole, and sensations and intensities of pleasure that defy ‘sense’ within terms of traditional ideas of logic or rationality. They exhibit a logic of their own; they remain undirected and temporal sites of pleasure and desire, sites where libidinal zones and those ‘worlds’ that make contact with us and which we make contact with, are continually in the process of being re/produced, transformed and thus re/created. The open-ness that lies at the heart of this dynamic expressly illustrates the potentially limitless and restless nature of desire and its incarnations, and the power of desire to initiate and engender a rearrangement and reorganisation of the body’s sensations and forms (204).

The sensuous and erotic encounters between dress and the body that transpire through drag kinging could be said to be effected through essentially ‘amorous relations’ if we consider that encounter in terms of pleasures, intensities, sensations, provocations, and reactions that excite libidinal ‘bodily zones’ and serve as modes of ‘corporeal intensification’ (198-9). Such encounters, more often than not, are expressed in drag king narratives as surprising and unexpected – again, Alana’s experience of her sock-cock provides a perfect example – and it is these unexpected encounters that Grosz suggests bring into play the greatest intensification of bodily zones: ‘Modes of greatest intensification of bodily zones occur, not through the operations of habitual activities, but through the unexpected, through the connection, conjunction and construction of unusual interfaces’ (198). The encounters between dress and flesh in drag kinging pose an interruption and an interaction of one surface with another, disengaging them from
their usual hierarchical and systematic circuit of functioning, creating and realigning them within different and new networks of exchange and linkages (198). Through these exchanges and linkages drag kings bring into play an erotic engagement with the body that again promotes a disquieting of the body and its boundaries or image, even as that encounter functions ostensibly within the conventions of these (195). One need only recall the many quotations from drag kings scattered throughout the chapters of this thesis to appreciate the legitimacy of this suggestion, and further, the positive, affirming, pleasurable, erotic but predominantly unexpected nature of these encounters. Furthermore, the encounters between dress and flesh that occur in drag kinging are never predictable, never oriented towards a goal, for such encounters, whatever they may elicit, are never guaranteed in advance. Such encounters are more akin to something that overtakes the subject, creates an ‘otherness’, a ‘dismemberment of the natural body’, a ‘fragmentation of the phenomenal field’, and in this way ‘the subject’s body ceases to be a body’, becoming the ‘site of provocations and reactions’ (200).

‘The subject ceases to be a subject, giving way to…processes over which it can exert no control and to which it only wants to succumb. Its borders blur [and] seep’, so for a while it is no longer clear where the body, the subject and dress, for instance, begin, end or stop (198). Temporarily, at least, it may be the blurring of corporeal boundaries, through the merging of and non-hierarchical associations between body and dress, which incites the erotics of drag kinging for those women who practice it. Further, I would go so far as to say that those encounters can be likened to the dissolution of bodily boundaries experienced in orgasm, in as much as they too prompt a momentary disorganisation and transformation of bodily boundaries and ‘a marking of the body in terms of sites of uneven intensity, patterns or configurations of feeling, labyrinthine maps of voluptuous pleasures and intensities’ (197).

The issue here is not whether the act of drag kinging is a sexual experience or encounter, but rather, the promotion of drag kinging as the execution of active and creative female desires. Those desires are not based on a model that equates desire with orgasmic release or relief from the body, in fact, it is more about being with the body, intensifying and igniting erotic engagement with one’s body through the unexpected, the contrary, the contamination of one ‘erotogenic zone or bodily surface’ by an/other (197). In addition, desire here is not object driven, nor does it have any objectives, for desire as erotic experience is always temporal, and thus, is always uncertain and non-
strategic; the experience of the erotic can be subject to the memory of what occurred through the act of reminiscing (drag king narratives being a case in point), but the actual carnal experience – the intensity of pleasure, the sensations – of the erotic must always be reanimated and revived in order to be recalled (Grosz 1995, 195). Here, there is not recollection but re/creation; the erotic experience of desire, is – to recall an earlier discussion – a pure positivity, a production, in which case it is, quite literally, always and only a ‘series of intensities’ (196). It remains visceral and affective. It defies signification and meaning in any traditional sense. It cannot be recorded or stored.

The benefits of thinking desire within these terms is invaluable, in that it refuses to link desire with death, in the Freudian sense, by resisting the principle that desire and erotic pleasure are always reducible to sexual satiation or reproduction, and hence are a form of compensation against the inevitability of and acquiescence to one’s own death; that is, it resists a model of desire centred around the Freudian model of sexual catharsis, both in the name of sexual ‘release’ and continuation of the species, and as a paradoxical supplement to one’s mortality. For women in particular, a theory of desire that resists this model, primarily centred as it is on a trope of male tumescence, orgasmic build up and release (not to mention the fantasy of the devouring vagina dentata that haunts that trope), must be an improvement, if only because it demonstrates that desire and erotic pleasure do not have to be reducible to latent or blatant objectives, conclusions, culminations, or conclusive outcomes. Desire and erotic pleasure can exist as free-wheeling and non-specific, as unpredictable moments of corporeal intensity, as sensations and arousals never before felt, as alliances, like those between dress and flesh, never imagined or thought before, and as the connections made with other bodies and their desires and pleasures, such as those made within drag king culture. Desire is, echoing Deleuze, ‘life’: ‘life is desire, and desire is the expansion of life through creation and transformation’ (Colebrook 2002, 135). To imagine, explore and invest desire with such positive and unlimited potential for (re)producing, (re)creating and recognising even more desires is to acknowledge a much improved theoretical option for promoting and celebrating the diversity and multi-layered female desires of drag king culture.

In searching for new ways to examine and speculate on the female desires that circulate in a female-centric site such as drag king culture, theories of desire that promote a non-
genital specific, non-goal oriented, and anti-psychoanalytic method for doing so are especially crucial and illuminating. In addition, if we promote those desires as latently queer, if only because they must simultaneously engage with dominant and privileged models of desire in the course of resisting them, then we might see how the female desires circulating in drag king culture arise from the need – or the desire! – to not only self-determine those desires and any engagement with them, but also to produce, create and develop them beyond models that are essentially rigid, complacent and lacking in imagination. Whilst my theorising of desire throughout this chapter doesn’t intend to offer a type of utopian dimension to desire that would separate it from, and place it over and above the social, it does argue that desire is not necessarily thwarted by or always an effect of the social. In fact, by theorising desire within Deleuzean terms we can see how desire produces and affects life, and in so doing desire must be afforded its role as a productive and active participant in the processes of the social, and as a result should be considered an equal ‘power’ in constituting the social. As Grosz states, ‘reality does not prohibit desire but is produced by it. Desire is the force of positive production, the action that creates things, makes alliances, and forges interactions’ (Grosz 1995, 179).

Desire, as it is produced and engaged within drag king culture, and as it operates in the same, highlights that, indeed, desire does create things, make alliances, forge interactions, and, more importantly, represent active, shifting and progressive female desires that cannot and should not be theoretically confined to psychoanalytic investigation. In many ways (and, paradoxically, to use terms employed by psychoanalysis), those desires demonstrate the inherently polymorphic and perverse nature of desire, representing as they do the many different and infinite forms and stages that desire can take and have, and illustrating that erotic pleasure is not subjugated to any function, such as reproduction (Gallop 1988, 106). Hopefully this chapter has demonstrated this, with particular reference made to the sensual encounters between dress and flesh in drag king culture as being both productive and one example of this. Being polymorphic, desire in this context can never be positioned or defined within a polarised or binary model of desire, nor can it provide or be realised through any definitive model, goal or ideal.

In the context of drag king culture, desire operates to produce and make pleasure, to create new and different connections, intensities, and ways of being, and to remain
open-ended with regard to its aims and practices. Desire here is productive but reproduces nothing; it is centred on effects not intentions, on what those effects make and do rather than what they mean or represent (183). Further, to focus on the effects and pleasures of female desire within these terms is to see them as serving no other function than to expand and proliferate further effects and pleasures, and to refuse to see them as subordinate to more ‘traditional’ models of female desire. This is a fairly radical concept when we consider the psychoanalytic dictates that usually bind and determine female desire, and further, how we should achieve, engage with, and understand our desires and erotic pleasures as women. That those effects and pleasures serve no other function than to expand and proliferate, reminds us that the female desires operating in drag king culture are but many amongst many others that might serve as an/other image and creation of desire.
8. CONCLUSION: CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING IN ITS CONTEXT?

The ‘truth’ to be seen in images is a tenuous issue…. What you will see is a metaphor: a surrogate, demanding context, association, articulation …

Kevin Ballantine and Norm Leslie
*The Realm of the Gods* (141)

Because this thesis focuses primarily on theorising and speculating upon various dynamics of drag kinging, it seemed an obvious progression to theorise and speculate upon how those dynamics might come to exist in the first place, and what effects those dynamics might have. Taking a cue from the above epigraph I could have initially posed the following questions of drag kinging: is drag kinging just about women impersonating men? Or, when I watch drag kinging, am I just seeing women who want to be like men? Further, if I had chosen to see the ‘truth’ of drag kinging as just about women performing, impersonating, or wanting to be men, this ‘truth’ would not have told me anything about the dynamics that lie behind or circulate around drag kinging, or how and why those dynamics arise and are effected. Indeed, if I were not interested in theorising or speculating upon those dynamics then the ‘truth’ of what I ‘see’ would tell me that drag kinging is just about women dressing up like and impersonating men. In reality however, drag kinging is and remains a far more complex female-bodied performance of female masculinity.

To ‘see’ the ‘truth’ of drag kinging as being just about women impersonating men, would be to ignore the disparate, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory discourses employed by those women to explore, understand, and explain their experiences and desires of and for masculinity. Further, it would also ignore how and why masculinity, performed, embodied and ‘seen’ on a female body, can create and command such significance, in a whole host of ways. In effect, ‘seeing’ drag kinging without looking behind the scene/s guarantees you will end up with just an image of a ‘woman-dressed-up-as-a-man’. Look behind the scene/s though and you will ‘see’ a sight/site where the complex interplay of multiple female desires and identifications with masculinity are variously performed, embodied, celebrated, eroticised and sexualised.
As Ballantine and Leslie assert, the ‘truth’ to be seen in images is a tenuous thing, and there is no ‘truth’ to be found simply by ‘seeing’ drag kinging. In fact, there is no ‘truth’ to be found at all. Drag king performances and the female desires and identifications with masculinity that inform them, remain resistant to being fixed or confined by the limitations of any one interpretation or meaning. Instead, this thesis has suggested that those performances, desires and identifications are created through and circulate within a queer female economy, which resists any formal validation, but nonetheless requires and gains validation by perversely operating through and investing in a variety of contexts, associations and articulations. Drag kinging and female masculinity should not be understood or taken at ‘face value’. Exploring and discussing female masculinity, and the desires and identifications that women engage with through the forum of drag kinging, demanded a disparate theoretical and speculative approach.

First and foremost, throughout this thesis I have intentionally reiterated the importance of the female body over and above any theoretical speculations or considerations I made that may question that status. I could not avoid the female body’s insistence on remaining centre stage. The female body is and remains the organic context, the corporeal framework and the meaningful body on which and through which many of the dynamics of drag kinging are located and ciphered. The female body both interpellates and ‘interprets’ the drag king body. In drag kinging there is no escaping the female body’s dogged determination to remain number one.

8.1 Female Carnal Knowledge

Throughout the course of this thesis, and its many speculations and theoretical considerations of drag kinging and female masculinity, the inherently contradictory and some might say perverse nature of both has been highlighted and emphasised. This has not been discussed as a negative or erroneous dynamic, but rather as one that affords, effects, and promotes female em/bodied masculinity and queer female desires. More specifically, the significance of the female body to those dynamics, highlighted through the varied theoretical speculations I made on the same, reveals that in drag kinging the female body is both already ‘produced’ and always in the process of production: it is a
female body both ‘hidden’ in/behind drag but always being ‘exposed’; it is a female body that refuses to be limited or inhibited but only through acknowledgement and embodiment of constraints; it is a female body that whilst acknowledging those constraints simultaneously resists them; it is a stubborn female body that refuses to absolve its status as the meeting place for the varied bodily and erotic dynamics and semantics of drag kinging. What has been revealed throughout the course of this thesis is that drag kinging and female masculinity tenaciously insist on the female body and its materiality, culturally and corporeally, even if this is not what drag kings may purposely or consciously intend. Further, it forces attention onto the female body for spectator and performer alike, rather than ignorance or dismissal of it. Female masculinity, performed, embodied and admired through drag kinging and kinging culture, promotes, unveils and celebrates the female body.

The term ‘body’, suggests Susan Bordo, serves as an epistemological metaphor for highlighting the subjects ‘locatedness’ or locatability as the finite locus for experience (Bordo 1993, 229). Bordo argues that whilst postmodern interpretations of the body celebrate the ‘spirit of epistemological jouissance’ that discourses of heterogeneity and fluidity promote, they do not (or refuse to) acknowledge ‘the located, limited, inescapably partial, and always personally invested nature of human ‘story making’’ (228). The notion of indeterminate sex and changeable gender, the notion of altering or refusing the body, is rejected by Bordo as a postmodern fantasy and myth. The appeal of such ‘archetypes’ is, she argues, undeniable, but contrasted with the Cartesian ideal of the universal knower and unified subject, that appeal reveals itself as a distinctly masculinist one (228). In the sense that femininity or the feminine is historically and traditionally celebrated for its ‘natural’ ability to empathise or ‘enter into the perspective of others’ – as ostensibly ‘fluid’ – then postmodern deliberations on the body could indeed be seen as inherently masculinist. Whilst I do not wish to engage in a discussion on the merits (or not) of Bordo’s argument, vis à vis the masculinist quality of postmodern interpretations of the body, I do want to borrow from her deliberations on postmodernism’s rejection of locatedness and the partiality of the body to support both the postmodernist and essentialist ideals that drag kings engaged with to discuss and describe their ‘bodily’ experiences.
As already highlighted through the first-hand narratives of the drag kings themselves, the body, or more specifically the gendered body, was often discussed within the postmodern ‘fantasy’ that Bordo derides. For instance, masculinity is seen as a body of appearances rather than an effect of biology – it is not ‘located’ anywhere, and yet female masculinity is often authorised through a return to essentialist ideals to explain, validate and promote female masculinity as an expression of ‘self’. Masculinity is regarded as a ‘sign’, yet female masculinity is often legitimatized in terms of essentialism – as something more than cultural (Dollimore 1991, 71). Specifically, essentialism – ‘the natural’ – is embraced by many masculine-identified women with regard to their female masculinity. Masculinity is claimed as something already embodied, or, alternatively, as something recolonised through performing as a drag king. In this case, masculinity materialises out of or from the female body, appearing as a miraculous act of re/discovery of something that was always already ‘there’.

Ultimately, the female masculine subject employs a contradictory combination of both postmodern and essentialist ideologies to explain and legitimate her masculinity. As I illustrated through Dollimore’s theory of transgressive re-inscription and Meyer’s Camp re-interpretation of parody, one often appropriates what is already available, becoming impossibly entwined, but not necessarily negatively so. The female masculine subject employs and deploys this contradictory amalgam out of necessity and a justifiable desire for validation. Whilst postmodernism celebrates the ‘schizophrenic’ body as one that can ‘split’ itself into diverse, often inappropriate and incompatible personas, it often denies the body’s physicality by translating it into a system of signs rather than an organism of carnal dimensions. Corporeality is often ignored, yet those systems of signification that produce us are also simultaneously produced and operate by means of our bodies. In drag kinging, whilst appropriation of specific postmodern ideals is favoured, this denial or erasure of the body is not effected.

In keeping with the ideal of the corporeal legitimation of female masculinity and its affects, ‘Acts and Acts of Embodiment’ confronted various dualisms that have traditionally sought to construct and order our lives. In particular, it challenged the easy divisions made between the body and mind, matter and the immaterial, and the literal and metaphorical, and argued that in constructing such divisions these dualisms recognise and thus seek to reconcile their inherent precariousness. Further, emphasis
was given to the body as dynamic and productive in an effort to eschew accepted
notions of the body as either passive in the face of prevailing signs and representational
systems, or as bounded, ‘solid’, or immutable. In effect, it granted embodiment
affectivity, and afforded the body a dynamism that promoted its incorporative and
mutable potential, and its boundlessness.

The incorporative and mutable potential of the body was especially highlighted in ‘And
the Dress was made Flesh’. Theoretical discussions on dress and the body revealed how
dress both constructs and constrains the body, whilst also acting as a potentially un-
limiting and subversive agent for the body. This perverse dynamic between dress and
the body was particularly highlighted in the embodied experiences of various drag
kings, where desires, fantasies, and identifications with masculinity were corporealsed
not only through the body, but equally through the corporeal affects of dress. Dress is
literally ‘carnalised’, such that the tenability of definitively prescribing the boundaries
of the body and dress becomes impossible. Further, where dress can be seen to elicit
such corporeal responses the relationship between dress and the body remains
ambiguous. Whilst this suggests that any sense of bodily boundaries and embodiment is
potentially fictional or precarious, it also provoked recognition that the body is
remarkably creative and ingenious in its ability to literally corporealise that which is
deemed immaterial, and to materialise the immaterial in ways that challenge easy
divisions between the two. The discussion of the dress/body relationship in ‘And the
Dress was made Flesh’ challenged not only the reducibility of body/dress boundaries
and the carnal effects of dress, but also compelled us to think of the driving force of
female desires and their quest to be literalised and materialised through, by and on the
body. The body’s mutability and endless capacity to incorporate and corporealise that
which is deemed not of the body remains undeniable.

The continued focus on the female body throughout this thesis emphasised how it is the
locus and cipher for the experience and embodiment of female masculinity, and the
masculine ‘signs’ employed to materialise and interpret it. Such is the significance of
this bodily knowledge – proved time and again through first-hand narratives – that
erasure of the body is impossible. If, as Bordo argues, the body is a ‘metaphor for our
locatedness in space and time’ and thus, for all experience – and I have continually
come back to this throughout this thesis – then postmodern discourses that refuse this
locatedness are effectively promoting the notion of no body and nobody (Bordo 1993, 229). In drag king narratives the body is never on a journey to nowhere, but always and irrefutably somewhere. Whilst Bordo argues that postmodern fantasies of the body refuse ‘to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility’, drag kings happily and proudly acknowledge and celebrate the ‘shape(s)’ that female masculinity takes (228).

The preceding discussions are not meant to suggest that drag kinging only works, or has meaning, at the level of embodiment, but as this thesis has continually reiterated, it is to keep promoting drag kinging as a female-embodied experience. As Mary Russo points out, insisting on anti-essentialism in regards to questions of the female body would mean ignoring, to put it crudely, the female body as relevant to questions of the female body (Russo 1994, 168). Whilst I have not directly argued in favour of essentialism, I have supported the materiality, or ‘matter’ of embodiment, in an effort to honour rather than ignore Russo’s argument. The aim has not been to subsume the female body within universalising or biological paradigms, but to insist on a body that is indisputably ‘there’, to argue for many of the dynamics of drag kinging as a ‘visceral’32 experience whilst not denying that they also operate through various productions of meaning. More specifically, emphasis on that embodied experience did not forget the relevance and importance of also locating that experience within certain contexts, in particular, traditional and prevailing cultural and ideological constructions and beliefs of the female body, im/proper femininity, ‘the lesbian’, and the masculine woman. It is difficult to move beyond these when theorising and speculating on the dynamics of drag kinging and drag king culture, because they invariably inform much of them.

Those constructions and beliefs remain important because they provoke a particular consciousness, dare I say it, even a gendered consciousness, which works to invoke and evoke many of those dynamics (Bordo 1993, 183). As Bordo observes: ‘in a culture that is in fact constructed on gender duality … one cannot be simply ‘human”, and so it is within drag king culture (241). ‘Embodied Acts’ in particular, examined this ‘fact’, acknowledging the sociocultural constraints that construct, affect, and determine female bodies and female subjectivity. This was also highlighted by my suggestion that those

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32 For the use of the term ‘visceral’ as suggestive of what amounts to ‘raw’ bodily, carnal, and ‘gut’ feelings and experiences, I am indebted to Elspeth Probyn’s keynote address at ‘In Conversation’ Conference, University of Adelaide, 16th November, 2001.
constraints are also actively recalled and perversely employed as a type of mediator against and through which the embodiment of female masculinity and female desires are made meaningful. Rather than seeing this dynamic as a form of ‘anti-femaleness’, it was argued as enabling other forms of ‘femaleness’, and as a direct challenge to those constraints that continue to discipline, regulate and normalise female subjectivity, the female body and female desires. Further, the female body and its desires are never discussed within psychoanalytic terms of ‘lack’, but in terms of connection and production. The female masculine subject, and her desires and erotic identifications with masculinity, are not determined or made meaningful in contrast to her ‘femaleness’. Rather, they enhance and afford ‘different’ modes of female embodiment. It is not through imagining and determining what is ‘other’ to the ‘female’ self, but through perceiving and accepting the new or different in the ‘female’ self, which remains crucial to understanding the above dynamics I have been discussing.

My risk then has been to suggest that drag kinging and its attendant dynamics remain indefinable, even meaningless, outside their articulation on and through the female body. However, this thesis has also conceded and suggested that drag kinging’s dynamics are context dependant in other ways too. More particularly, violation of discourses surrounding female masculinity and lesbianism was discussed as an underlying though vital context in the production of those dynamics. ‘Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom’, ‘Kinging goes Camping’ and ‘Draggressive Women in the Camp’ focused primarily on this notion of violation as intrinsic to and effective of many of drag kinging’s dynamics. It was generally argued that it is not through outright resistance to dominant and prevailing discourses on female masculinity and its assumed correlative, lesbianism, but rather through perverse appropriation of them that those dynamics arise. Effectively, it is the very discourses and constructs that are put in place in order to render certain subject positions and sexualities as culturally unthinkable, which are re-worked. In particular, the mis/appropriation of the subject position of the ‘phallic’ dyke was examined to highlight the potential of securing rather than rejecting abjected homosexual identifications. Far from rendering the phallic dyke as impossible, those discourses and constructs inadvertently produce the phallic dyke as a possibility. In drag kinging and drag king culture, identification with the phallic dyke is cause for celebration and erotic pleasure. However, I also argued that it is not without a certain irony that such identifications and pleasures are made and produced, although this was
not argued as an inherently negative dynamic, but rather as a Camp appropriation in the service of queer female subjectivity and desires.

‘Draggressive Women in the Camp’ in particular, focused on the relationship female masculinity has with the phallic dyke. Acknowledged in heterosexist constructs as both impossible but equally a threat, mis/appropriation of the phallic dyke by drag kings and drag king culture served several purposes. Firstly, the phallic dyke, although an abject and im/possible figure in heterosexist discourses, provides a point of erotic identification. Validated through recognition and celebration in drag king culture, eroticisation of the phallic dyke was also argued as arising from perverse violation of the codes and strictures that surround her. Without these constraints in place, violation would not be possible, and therefore, much of the erotic potential of the phallic dyke would not exist. To paraphrase Judith Butler, it is the law that deploys the abject figure of the phallicised dyke that effectively announces and offers her as an inadvertent site of eroticisation (Butler 1993, 97). Further, to regard her as a ‘threat’ to femininity and subsequently heterosexuality, only adds to the perverse pleasure taken from acting out and eroticising her. Effectively, those constraints serve a purpose, albeit perverse (all the more better), for without them the phallic dyke could not exist, and without the phallic dyke many of the erotic dynamics of drag kinging and drag king culture would not exist.

Secondly, I also argued that the phallic dyke provided another point of identification from which to announce one’s female masculinity, and to also contest ‘proper’ feminine identification. Paradoxically, the phallic dyke, rather than repelling identification is deliberately mobilised by drag kings and drag king culture as a figure for idealising female masculinity as powerful, desirable and erotic. Moreover, in her refusal to conform to prevailing definitions and constructions of feminine subjectivity, the drag king – the masculine woman – calls into question the authority of heterosexual demands to be ‘properly’ sexed. As outlined through Judith Butler’s careful and thorough analysis of feminine subjectivity, feminine subjectivity is produced through a series of demands and taboos, not as something inherently ‘natural’ or pre-cultural. In addition, by instituting the notion that one can ‘fail’ to conform or assume ‘proper’ feminine subjectivity, heterosexist constructions of feminine subjectivity, paradoxically, recognise this. Drag kings and drag king culture utilise and illustrate this point, turning
those constructions against themselves, whilst threatening their validity through their perverse mutation of them. It is not, as I argued, through rejection of ‘proper’ feminine identification that female masculinity is produced, but rather as a possibility always already inherent to feminine identification. Female masculinity’s refusal to be rendered illegitimate or ‘impossible’ is, ironically, promoted through drag king and drag king culture’s perverse refusal to repudiate constructions of ‘proper’ feminine subjectivity. In her own Camp way, the masculine woman and those that admire her rearticulate the laws on feminine subjectivity in order to validate their own identifications and desires.

The final chapter ‘Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom: Queer Refigurings’ focused primarily on the rearticulation of traditional laws of desire, particularly those of female desire. The sub-chapter ‘Violation as fantasy’s realisation’ extended the dynamic of transgressive re-inscription as principally informing the fantasies inherent to drag king culture. Fantasies become real/ised through the performance, eroticisation and celebration of what is constructed as impossible or absent. The various pleasures derived from fantasies realised are dependant on the dynamic of violation. I argued that violation was only possible where what is constructed as impossible and absent is, paradoxically, possible and present, and therefore, available for mis-appropriation. This perverse dynamic remains an inherently Camp practice and the result of queer female agency and desires in action.

The promotion of queer female desires was further explored in ‘Writing female desire: desires in action’. This sub-chapter sought to move away from traditional theories of desire, which predominantly view it within terms of lack, repression, and insatiability, rather than as productive and positive. In particular, I focused on Grosz’s exploration of desire and her refutation of psychoanalytic models of desire. Grosz maintained that adherence to these models denies the autonomy of both sexes, in particular that of women. I argued that such models, as inherently heterosexist, can not account for nor acknowledge female desire as active, or as an activity in its own right. Women function as objects rather than subjects of desire under such models, and therefore, those models remain inadequate when it comes to exploring or accounting for queer female desires.

In contrast to such models, I adopted Colebrook’s Deleuzean theoretical approach to theorising desire. Modelling theories of desire within this context allows the theorist of
desire to resist approaching it from within terms of a lack. Desire was argued as productive, in the sense that production was not limited to fulfilment or an end, but rather, towards new and endless possibilities for further productions of desire. In effect, desire begins from connection, and Deleuze’s concept of ‘becoming’ was employed to illustrate this idea of connection as productive and creative desires in action. The Deleuzean model of desire as productive and active allowed me to argue for the embodied effects of desire as a becoming – a becoming otherwise, a transformation of self understood for the effects it produces. Desire was not theorised as directed towards a satiated state, or as originating from some primal sub-conscious goal, but rather as means to extend and expand the possibilities of bodies.

The promotion of desire as an extension and expansion of bodies was further explored through adopting Grosz’s experimental interpretation of further Deleuzean concepts of desire. Grosz’s ‘way of looking’ at desire largely centred on the coming together of often disparate elements – organic and non-organic – to effect an encounter that creates and produces pleasures – erotic or otherwise. Again, the encounters between dress and flesh in drag king culture provide a wonderful example of this, where desire produces facial hair out of pencil lines, a swaggering cowboy with the wearing of chaps, and a penis out of a sock. In moving away from heterosexist and traditional models of desire and experimenting with models based on Deleuzean concepts, Grosz explored and expounded on desire as more about intensities – of the investment of libido in an encounter. It is the coming together of things which creates and produces pleasures. It is the connection between things, the resulting encounter, and the intensities produced that are valued as productions of desire.

Desire, as it was explored in ‘Fantasies and Desires in the Kingdom: Queer re-figurings’, sought to provide theoretical models that adequately addressed the queer desires, erotic encounters between dress and flesh, and sensuous pleasures of drag kinging. The focus was not on genital specific desire, the satiation of desire, or desire modelled on sexual catharsis, but rather on models of desire that create and produce interactions, intensities, and new connections between bodies and ‘things’.
8.2 Moving Beyond Dualism?

In theorising and writing on drag kinging’s dynamics, and more importantly contextualising those dynamics, I acknowledge the difficulties of moving beyond dualism. More obviously, the interpretation of drag is based on ideas of a dualism between feminine and masculine dress codes, and this is impossible to deny. Without historical and prevailing cultural and social codes of feminine and masculine dress and body language, performances of drag would have no impact. Further, discussing the impact and effects that drag has on the woman performing or engaging with drag, also highlights the impossibility of denying the power that continuing systems of gender dualism have on individuals and individual bodies. To acknowledge this is to understand the deeply embedded rules that guide and even govern our bodies, actions, desires and sexuality. Rather than being biologically fixed, those rules remain historically specific, evoking and implying particular social, political and aesthetic values (Foster 1998, 18). As Foster suggests, they ‘impart to any body a specificity that must be acknowledged, yet they also connect that body to other cultural orchestrations of identity’ (18). To effect a change in these rules, for instance, through the perverse pleasures and erotic identifications that arise when women connect with abject identities, is to both equally align oneself with them as one challenges them: is to connect with other possibilities, other ‘orchestrations’ of identity.

Drag kinging, female masculinity, and drag king culture ‘grapple’ with the rules that guide and govern female bodies and desires. The responses of drag kings, as outlined, discussed, and theorised throughout this thesis, are simultaneously both active and reactive, calling into question the ‘natural’ socio-cultural position of women and their desires, whilst perversely employing the same in order to derive pleasures, erotic or otherwise from their female masculinity. However, to only read or imagine drag kinging and female masculinity as departing from presumed ideals of femininity and female desire, or as potentially radical, is to understand the rules that govern the same as more dualistic than they are. For instance, by producing configurations of identity outside ‘proper’ feminine identification, rules of feminine subjectivity effectively produce those identities fully inside. Female masculinity, as an example of this, then becomes ‘not a possibility beyond culture, but a concrete possibility that is refused and redescribed as impossible’ (Butler 1999, 98). Female masculinity cannot be considered inherently
radical or antithetical to ideals of female subjectivity then, when it already adheres within.

Further future analysis of drag kinging’s appeal and the celebration of female masculinity amongst queer women might discover and argue that the socio-cultural position of women is more ambiguous, fragmented, divided, and contradictory than this thesis may have allowed for. For instance, historical overviews of the female body suggest that progressive phallicisation of the female body has been developing over time (Stratton 1996, Bordo 1993). From the rise of the slim, more ‘masculine’ female body entering the workforce in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to the rise of the trim, hard, tight female body of the late twentieth century, and the escalation of anorexia amongst women and girls in a post-industrial capitalist culture, the masculinisation of women’s bodies is nothing new. Whilst I am not suggesting that the appeal of female masculinity is a direct consequence of the masculinisation of women’s bodies over time, it might be interesting to consider the drag king – the masculine woman – as the logical, perhaps perverse extension of the phallic woman. Further, the appeal of male youth figures as models on which to base one’s drag king persona also demands research. Does the youthful male figure embody the ambiguity that women have internalised over time? Does he represent both phallic and effeminate qualities, making him an obvious choice for appropriation by masculine women? What is his position within patriarchal culture and how might (or might not) this relate to many drag kings’ preoccupation with him?

The construction of the phallicised female body over time, and the consequences of this construction on the psyches of women, cannot be overrated. Whilst I would not suggest that drag kings are hapless victims of the demand to be both ‘woman’ and ‘not woman’ simultaneously, it would be interesting for future research to investigate this as a possibility – as perhaps one explanation amongst many – for the attraction masculinity holds for some women. In the context of drag king performances, could we regard the performance and embodiment of female masculinity as a direct attempt at control of that attraction and the way it is embodied and displayed? Could this embodiment and performance of masculinity be examined to reveal that female masculinity is for a strictly female, not heterosexual male gaze and consumption?
The above questions and deliberations demand further and thorough ethnographic research and analysis. Far from being a definitive examination of drag kinging and the appeal of female masculinity to both performer and spectator, this thesis has hopefully sparked future interest in investigating female masculinity and its performance, not only within drag king culture but other cultures, such as ‘play parties’ and non-western cultures (an area particularly ripe for investigation albeit with attendant language barriers to deal with). Future studies might also fully recognise and further investigate the role of the audience to the efficacy and pleasure of drag king performances along with the desires behind the appeal of drag king performances of female masculinity on those audiences. This thesis has attempted to deal with just some of the complex relations and contexts that surround the tensions, contradictions, and effects that make up drag kinging’s dynamics. This has revealed, literally and figuratively, how drag kinging’s dynamics are variously determined, enabled and constrained by the very same. The complex dynamic exchanges that make up drag king culture have only been partly revealed, and there is surely more questioning, examining and analysis that will emerge. Is this a good thing? Will this only dissect, expose, and ultimately take away the charm and charisma of the drag king? Will too much revealing and revelation dispel the erotic and other dynamics that structure and maintain drag king culture?

I am reminded here of Grossberg’s suggestion, or warning, that ‘too much legitimation’ of certain practices, in this case drag kinging, via my own or others’ intellectual explorations, could ‘redefine the possibilities of its effectiveness’ (Grossberg 1992, 79). This implies that drag kinging could become ‘an increasingly meaningful form to be interpreted’ rather than a sub-cultural form ‘to be felt on one’s body and to be lived passionately and emotionally’ (79). Perhaps it is best to take a cue from former drag king Lizerace: ‘You’ll never have answers, and if you do, life is ruined!’ In my defence, my channelling of drag kinging through various theoretical lenses and models should be read as one way, but not the way to analyse its dynamics, for to accept the refutability of that analysis is to promote drag kinging as always exceeding academic analysis, and therefore, rightly, to promote its refusal to be contained or restricted by it.

33 Personal correspondence with Lizerace (29th July, 2000).
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APPENDIX

QUESTIONS FOR THESIS ON DRAG KINGING

1.) How do you identify sexually?
2.) Does your sexuality or sexual identity inform your choice to do drag? If so, how?
3.) If you identify as a lesbian or dyke, why do you like to ‘dress-up’ and perform as a ‘man’? (alternatively, if you don’t identify as a lesbian/dyke, I would still like to know why you like to perform in drag)
4.) Can you explain or discuss your desire to do/perform drag?
5.) What fantasies or desires of/for masculinity and maleness inform your particular drag king persona?
6.) What is your drag king’s name? Is he a member of a group or troupe – if so what is their name?
7.) What is your drag king character/persona – can you explain him to me – how do you perform/do him?
8.) Does kinging have/hold any erotic appeal for you?
9.) Is ‘packing’ important to your performance as a drag king? If so, why/how?
10.) Is your drag king performance ‘political’ or purely for pleasure? If either or both, can you discuss this?
11.) Is your drag king character ‘separate’ from you? Is there a clear boundary between you and him?
12.) If you identify as a lesbian, are you a lesbian when you’re in drag?
13.) Does performing your character give you the ‘freedom’ to transgress the boundaries of your own body/identity? If so, can you explain this to me?
14.) Does your character ‘morph’ into other identities or sexualities – for example can he be gay, straight, bi, queer, etc.?
15.) Drag kings often talk about having ‘faggot energy’. What do you think this means? Does this apply to you?
16.) Kinging is often described as empowering, or as eliciting some form of experience associated with ‘power’. Do you agree with this, and what, if any, is your experience of this power?
17.) Do you see/feel drag as a type of ‘body modification’ or ‘body technology’ that facilitates or enables you to access ‘other’ identities and sexualities? If so, can you explain your experiences of this to me?

18.) Do you think there is a difference between performing and admiring drag kinging/kings? By that I mean, do they go hand in hand, are they inseparable, or are they two totally different experiences?

19.) On the subject of admiration and performance, does drag kinging allow you to desire and admire certain masculinities – that is, masculinity(s) remain the subject of your desires, whilst also allowing you to be the object of someone else’s (or possibly your own) desire and admiration?

20.) Is there a narcissistic element to drag? Does it allow you to desire and admire yourself? One drag king I spoke to put this way: “I am more desirable to myself”.

21.) Can you tell me how drag kinging makes you feel? What are your bodily experiences of doing drag?

22.) Do you withhold or divulge confirmation of your ‘femaleness’ to your audiences? (or is this unnecessary given that your audiences are likely to know who you are anyway?)

23.) Drag kings often talk about the ‘freedom’ that kinging affords them. Can you elaborate on this? What things or experiences are enabled through kinging? Are these erotic or sexual experiences?

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS

1.) What is your name? (first name only if you prefer)

2.) What is your age?

3.) What is your nationality?

4.) What city/country do you live in?

5.) How, or, do you identify ethnically?

Finally, if you wish your responses to remain confidential please let me know otherwise I will assume it is okay for me to quote you, by name, throughout the course of my writing. Please do not feel obligated to answer any question you are not comfortable with. The idea of this exercise is to maintain an element of fun, or pleasure for you! Elaborating on my initial request, I want to promote drag kinging as a sexy, provocative, and fun experience that affords various pleasures, so the idea
behind these questions is to keep it that way. Although I am writing a lengthy academic piece, I still want to illustrate this positive image of kinging. I look forward to your responses and I hope we can maintain our researchee/researcher relationship throughout the course of my Doctorate. Once again, thanks for agreeing to be part of my research, but remember, you are always free to opt out at any stage, for whatever reason, although I hope this does not need to happen. I am always available to discuss any issues you might have with the questionnaire, or if there is anything you might like to discuss with me that I have not included in the above. I am always willing to have your feedback or ideas on what you think I should be including on, or asking of, drag kinging.

Regards,

Julie Hanson
PhD Research Scholar
Adelaide University
Dept. of English (Cultural Studies)