

Doing Drag:

From Subordinate Queers to Fabulous Queens

Drag as an Empowerment Strategy for Gay Men



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Your make up is terrible, but I love you anyway – Alaska Thunderfuck

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INTRODUCTION

I have become so intrigued by drag queens watching RuPaul's Drag Race, - America's Next Top Model for drag queens- in the last months, that I have frequently had dreams about drag. As a gender studies scholar with a profound interest in men and masculinities, I simply cannot understand why I did not look into this phenomenon earlier. It seems as if all my interests coalesce in the drag queens: performativity, masculinities, empowerment, identity, queer theory, gender bending, power relations and subversion. And so, the general topic for this thesis was decided upon during the first course of the Comparative Women's Studies program. Not long after that, I meet Marcel. He had had quite some experience as a drag queen and we struck up a conversation. Soon after that we met at his house and he taught me how to apply the large amounts of grime and make up I would need to become a drag queen myself. It took a couple of hours, and after each step he took a picture of me. At first I felt ather foolish - until I noticed the shape of my face changing through the use of the make up. I actually felt somewhat more feminine.

When I came across an article written by (then) graduate student Keith McNeal, named Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance (1999), I became aware of drag as an empowerment strategy for homosexual men. The gay¹ man, accused of being effeminate, takes that femininity, enlarges and exaggerates it, and by doing so, steals the show and inverts power relations: the subordinate queer turns into a fabulous queen.

In this thesis I will elaborate on McNeal's theory. I will demonstrate where the subordinate position that gay men take up in society comes from according to theories of masculinities, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, and by drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity I will demonstrate how drag queens can retaliate against the hegemony of heterosexuality. Apart from theoretical research I will conduct interviews with four Dutch queens to demonstrate how drag might be considered empowering. Since McNeal's theory focuses on empowerment for gay men, these interviewees are all gay. Another important reason for including interviews in this research is that I wanted to give the drag queens a voice.

¹ In this thesis, I have chosen to use 'gay' as a term for homosexuality, and specifically homosexual men. I am aware it is by no means an unambiguous term, but it greatly improves readability.

Research Questions

In this thesis I will set out to answer the following question:

>>How can drag serve as a strategy of empowerment for homosexual men?

I define 'empowerment' as using one's own qualities or resources to increase control or power of one's own situation. In that light, the above question asks how performing drag can be a way for homosexual men to increase power over their own subordinate position.

Before this question can be answered, I need to establish a working definition of drag. There are many forms of female impersonation which all seem to have their own motivations or goals, drag is but one of those and is arguably governed by its own set of goals and motivations. In order to explain what makes drag different from other forms, I will draw on literature and the interviews I have done to define drag within the parameters of this thesis.

Another important question for this thesis is therefore:

>>What is drag?

This question will result in a working definition of drag that I will use in this thesis in order to set the parameters in which my research will be done.

Methods

I will approach my research of the empowering qualities of drag two-fold. For the first part I will draw on several texts to establish a working definition of drag. After that, I will elaborate on how drag can be considered empowering. The key text behind this thesis is the paper written by McNeal, named *Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance* (1999). In it, he explains how the marginalized position of gay men in the Western world can lead to a double-bind: on the one hand they are considered feminine because of their object choice, while at the same time their biological sex creates cultural expectations and demands regarding their masculinity. Drag, he argues, can be a way of retaliating against this system. In order to explain why homosexuality is considered marginalized, I will draw on a theory of masculinities and their governing power relations as described by Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities* (2005). This theory is closely tied in with patriarchy and the concept of compulsory heterosexuality as coined by Adrienne Rich (1981).

Finally, to demonstrate how the above mentioned retaliation is brought about, I will demonstrate how according to Judith Butler (1990) the drag queen mocks the system of

gender essentialism.

For the second part of this thesis, I will show how drag can be empowering by using four interviews with drag queens. Each of the four drag queens, I will show, have different ways in which their performance can be considered empowering. I will analyse the different aspects of their performances, highlighting the similarities and differences and which of these aspects makes the performances empowering. Interviews were used in order to let the drag queens 'speak' and to gain insight in how the empowering qualities of drag might work in Dutch society.

In order to find my respondents I used snowball-sampling, i.e., I approached gay men I knew were involved in drag and they pointed me towards other drag queens. One exception is Lady Galore, who is somewhat of a public figure. I approached her by E-mail requesting an interview. I specifically approached gay men, since I wanted to research the empowering properties of drag for gay men in line with McNeal's theory that drag can be a way to retaliate against straight hegemony. Due to the nature of the interviews, I kept the sample size limited to four. Moreover, since I draw on the interviews to give examples of empowering qualities in drag, a larger sample size would not necessarily have added to the validity of the data gathered. The interviews themselves were informal, unstructured in-depth interviews and in practice much resembled conversations. Unstructured means I have a basic interview plan in mind but generally let the respondents take the lead in the conversation. (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.111). I used a short list of general topics I wanted to address, included as a supplement, and covered those topics within the conversations. Yet, it was my goal to let the informants lead the conversation in order to make sure they talked about what was important for them, and took my time answering questions they had for me during the interview. Regarding the specific topic of my research, I told the informants I was doing research into drag and emancipation and briefed them after the interview about my specific research questions, so as not to steer them towards a topic during the interviews. The conversations were recorded. All informants verbally consented at the start of each interview to doing the interview, to recording it and to using the data and their name (either their boy name or drag name) in this thesis. Afterwards the interviews were transcribed and coded. Fragments of the transcripts are used to illustrate my analysis of the drag performance of the informants. Note that in those analyses both male and female pronouns are used to refer to the same person. My reason for that is two-fold. In the first place all the drag queens I have interviewed seem to use both.

Other drag queens are usually referred to as 'she'. I tried to use 'she' wherever it concerned the drag persona of the interviewee, and 'he' when talking about past experiences or explicit out-of-drag-situations. Secondly, I feel the drag queens walk the line between the sexes for as long as she is performing drag. At the same time drag performance greatly depends on a binary gender system, as I will demonstrate later on. I therefore chose not to use gender neutral pronouns but rather use them interchangeably, in order to illustrate that paradox.

WHAT IS DRAG?

As far as I'm concerned, being any gender is a drag – Patti Smith

In order to research the possible empowering qualities of drag, it is necessary to demarcate the field and define the subject, as it were. I will demonstrate that although drag is about female impersonation, not all female impersonation is drag. I will therefore briefly address the history of female impersonation, after which I will address contemporary performance of drag in order to arrive at a working definition of drag and the drag queen. For the history of drag I am drawing on Roger Baker, whose *Drag, a History of Female Impersonation on the Stage* (1968) gives a clear overview of it. I am drawing on this work because the performing arts have played an important role in the concept of female impersonation and as such it has been rather well-documented.

When looking into the history of female impersonation, we come across a number of difficulties. One of which is the difference between cross-dressing, transvestism, drag, and the difference between performance and (sexual) identity. For the purpose of this thesis, I will set out to briefly address the history of female impersonation in theatre. This will demonstrate how drag emerged from a larger context of female impersonation. The paragraph hereafter is devoted to definitions and terminology. It seems terminology addressing various forms of female impersonation has changed over the years. The difference between performance (in a theatrical sense) and expressing identity will be discussed in the next section.

Drag – A Historical Overview

As long as there have been gendered categories, there have been cross-dressers (where cross-dressers seems to be the preferred word, at the moment to refer to fe-/male impersonation (Garber, 1992, p. 4)). The very word 'cross-dressing' implies a crossing over and a transgressing of boundaries. That the transgression of crossing gendered boundaries is old indeed, is illustrated by the Bible's condemnation of it. Deuteronomy 22:5 states "A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God." Crossing gendered boundaries, or rather, prohibiting

that crossing, was important enough for the ancient Hebrews to make a law out of it some five thousand years ago. Deuteronomy 22:5 is in that regard likely to be the oldest written source about gendered categories and cross-dressing.

Cross-dressing also occurs in mythology and literature. Some examples include the story in Greek mythology where Achilles was disguised as a woman by his mother to hide him from Odysseus, so he would not be drafted into war. Portia, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* dresses as a man to protect Antonio. A well-known contemporary example is Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings – The Two Towers* by Tolkien, who disguises herself as a man and rides into battle. Famous historical examples include Jeanne d'Arc and Pope Joan. Cross-dressing appears in Western written sources throughout the ages, yet not much is known about it outside these sources. It seems most records about cross-dressing concern theatre. Quite a lot has been written about specifically female impersonation in theatre. Throughout history, female roles have often been played by men dressed as women. In fact, women have only recently started appearing on stage. Baker in fact states that female impersonation is one of the oldest traditions of the theatre (1968, p. 51). The practice, he claims, was very common in Chinese and Japanese culture, as well as among the ancient Greeks and in Elizabethan England. In the latter, it was the dubious reputation of acting as an occupation as well as the discomfort of touring the country and the quality of the theatres that made the stage "no place for a girl," he writes (*Ibid.* p.52).

In England, female roles were played by boys well into the seventeenth century. Up until then, boys playing the roles of women were intensively trained in walking and talking 'female' and it was not unheard of that a good female impersonator achieved somewhat of a star-status (Baker, 1968, p. 61). When near the end of the seventeenth century women were starting to appear on the stage, the tradition of the female impersonated subsided. A notable development then took place in eighteenth century Italian opera culture with the rise in popularity of the castrati. Boys would be castrated to maintain a soprano singing voice, as women were still seldom allowed on stage. At least in Italy the castrati were often quite popular among a female audience and they are said to often have been vain and dramatic (*Ibid.* p. 113).

Female impersonation on the stage disappeared. Baker therefore argues that today's drag traditions share no direct link with for example Elizabethan practices of female impersonation, but is rather rooted in burlesque (originally a work or performance intended to be humorous

through means of parody) at the end of the nineteenth century (Baker, 1968. p. 159). He even states that "Comedy must always dominate in any drag act if it is to remain within the bounds of good taste[...]" (Ibid.) Interestingly, both Baker in his work (p. 171) and Florence Tamagne in her chapter on homosexuality in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Modern Age* (2010, p. 61) mention a sharp increase in female impersonation since the First World War. Tamagne notes how in a military context homosexuality was subject to court martial, but that the drag performances done by young officers were in no way suspicious and were thought to keep the troops' moral high in both the First and Second World War (Ibid).

The mindful reader will have noticed how homosexuality is only now mentioned. The association between cross-dressing and homosexuality is arguably relatively recent and emerged between the two World Wars. While female impersonators in the army were quite common during the First War, Tamagne describes how towards the end of the Second World War female impersonation within the military was increasingly frowned upon and could even lead to a dishonourable discharge (2010, p. 61). Although this example rests on military practices, the shift in mentality regarding female impersonation and its association with homosexuality between the First and Second World War is a clear example of how Western cultural views regarding gendered behaviour and its connection to homosexuality came to be. And times were hard for homosexual men. After the war, the USA saw a rise in conservatism as a result of a "return to normalcy" (Ibid, p. 62). This led to the "denunciation of deviances" and to what is now known as The Lavender Scare, referring to a period of persecution and fear of homosexuals orchestrated by Joseph McCarthy. Presumably, homosexuals were just as dangerous as communists (Ibid). Much is known about the following years in which many homosexual men and women led double lives and relied on underground scenes.

Until the night from June 27th to 28th, 1969. It was in this evening that the New York police raided the Stonewall Inn that evening. The Stonewall Inn was a well known gay bar and had been raided on earlier occasions, something that was quite routine in the 1960's in the United States. Usually during those raids people would be arrested for not carrying ID or for wearing clothes of the opposite sex. This night, however, the regulars fought back, sparking a series of demonstrations and riots. 'Stonewall' is often seen as a pivotal point for the LGBT-rights movement and like it happens with historic moments, is surrounded by myths and legends. One of those is that it was a drag queen that started the riots by throwing some coins in the face of a police officer. For the purpose of this thesis it is not relevant whether this did or did

not happen. What is relevant is that the story shows that ever since the Stonewall riots drag and the LGBT-movement have been inextricably linked (Carter, 2004; Drexel, 1997; Valocchi 2004). With Stonewall I have reached the point of the contemporary drag queen. Arguably, a lot has happened in the drag community since Stonewall, notably the recent increase in publications about drag kings.² And throughout the years, drag queens have been popular to different extents. Recent developments include the increasing popularity of the American TV-show RuPaul's Drag Race, broadcasted by LGBT-oriented network LogoTV. The show is a spin on the popular genre of reality-TV. For the past seven years, each year a number of contestants have competed in a race for the title of 'America's Next Drag Superstar'. The show is broadcasted in a number of countries around the world and has won several awards.

Drag - Towards a Definition

Now that I have outlined the history of female impersonation, I will set out to arrive at a working definition of drag. In the previous paragraph on the history of cross-dressing, I have used different words to refer to the practice of dressing as the opposite sex: transvestism, cross-dressing, female impersonation and, of course, drag. The difference, at least etymologically, is rather clear. 'Transvestism' derives from the Latin trans-, which means 'across' and vestire-, meaning 'to dress'. This also makes clear where the word 'cross-dressing' comes from. This implies that a drag queen is engaging in transvestism or cross-dressing. Yet, a cross-dresser is not necessarily a drag queen. At this point, I need to make clear I am deliberately avoiding the word 'transvestite' here, because of a certain cultural connotation to this word. Although arguably, and as I will demonstrate in the interviews, this is not set in stone. The question now is: if a drag queen is a cross-dresser, but a cross-dresser is not a drag queen, what defines the drag queen? - Apart from high heels and large amounts of glitter, of course.

With regard to defining drag and drag queens, I draw on the sophisticated definition in *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators*, which was simultaneously published in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46(3-4).

² There were 63 hits for the "drag queen" lemma in Picarta on March 20th 2014. 53% of that was written after 2000. At the same time, there are 40 hits for "drag king", 75% of which was written after 2000. Both "queen" and "king" result in somewhere around 30 hits after 2000. The numbers suggest, however, that the interest in drag kings is relatively new and growing rapidly. I suspect that this may be due to 'over'-representation of women within the field of gender studies and an increase in interest in (performed) masculinities in recent years (Butler, 1988, 1990; Halberstam, 1998).

Editors Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood define drag queens as individuals who perform being women in front of an audience that knows these individuals are actually men. Furthermore, they importantly state that:

at the root of this conceptualization is the explicit recognition that the individual publicly performing femininity and being a woman is also simultaneously acknowledged to be a man and not a woman. [...] Drag queens, like their drag king brothers, put a paradoxical spin on the notion of "to be or not to be" by demonstrating that "being" need not be an either/or proposition and that there are actually multiple ways that gender can be performed and experienced.

Schacht and Underwood, 2004, p. 4.

In the preface of this anthology, Judith Lorber adds two important trade marks of drag: performance and parody. The performance aspect is based on the fact that drag needs an audience in order to be drag: a crucial part of the drag performance is the audience that is 'in on it,' that knows that the woman performing is 'actually' a man. In other words, Lorber states the audience is 'in on the joke' and the joke is that the drag queen's femininity is pure performance - an exaggerated gender display. (Lorber, 2004, xv-xvi).

The above mentioned makes clear how drag as a form of cross-dressing differs from other types of female impersonation or trans-gendered identity. A transvestite, for example, is usually considered to be a man in a private setting, and the act seems to be erotically motivated. This has little to do with performing femininity, let alone performing femininity in front of an audience. This definition of the transvestite is a somewhat dangerous one, and largely seems to be culturally defined. Technically and etymologically, a drag queen could be called a transvestite, like I stated above.

To elaborate on this, individuals with a transsexual identity are likely to have an invested interest in continuously passing as their preferred sex. Other forms of trans-gendered identities might want to pass as both sexes, or neither, or something else transcending gender. The drag queen, however, is typically a male performing exaggerated (hence the parody) femininity in front of an audience aware of the sex of the performer. Although there have

been drag performers who identified as trans-women³, the drag performer usually seems to be a cis-gendered male.

It is important to note that this definition of drag heavily relies on a binary gender system. In other words, in order to perform femininity as a man, there needs to be an other sex to pass as. Drag is a parody of otherness (Lorber, 2004, xvi), and as such is reliant on gendered categories of apparel and behaviour: "it needs visible contrasts of dress and behaviour" (ibid.). This means drag heavily relies on a clear distinction between men and women, so the male drag performer can pass as a woman. For Lorber, this raises the question whether there is still a place for drag in a society with increasingly fluent gendered identities. She argues that there is, as long as there is still tabooed gender behaviour. As long as there are things men cannot do, say or wear because they are 'feminine', there will be drag. (Ibid).

Let there be drag.

With regard to defining drag, there is one very important question remaining: is contemporary drag a gay prerogative? Without a doubt, gay men are overrepresented in drag culture. Famous examples being Divine (Harris Glenn Milstead), RuPaul Charles, Miss Understood (Alex Heimberg) and Lady Bunny (John Ingle), as well as Dutch drag queen Lady Galore (Sander den Baas) to name but a few. Even fictional drag characters like Anthony 'Tick' Belrose, also known as Mitzi Del Bra (played by Hugo Weaving) in the 1994 drag-epos *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Dessert* and the other characters in the film are gay. Moreover, like I noted above, it is quite often suggested that it was drag queens who threw the first stone at the Stonewall riots - which was in itself a pivotal moment for the LGBT-rights movement (Valocchi 2004; Drexel 1997). Moreover, six seasons of the popular U.S. TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* I mentioned above, each starring fourteen drag queens in the race for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, had only gay and transgendered contestants.

Arguably, not all drag queens are gay. Just like not all drag queens are men, or identify as male. I do claim in this thesis, however, that contemporary drag is a gay prerogative, albeit not exclusively. It is my claim that the gendered taboos Lorber e.g. mentions are more often part of the every day life of gay men and that they are, importantly, more aware of their 'transgressions' and that they are therefore more likely to ridicule or contest them through drag. I will demonstrate this in the next chapters. This does by no means mean that non-gay

³ One example is Carmen Carrera, a contestant of season three of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. During the series, she came out as a transgendered woman.

people cannot be drag queens. Drag is not an exclusive gay right: but it is a prerogative. Indeed, in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* Marjorie Garber notes how drag⁴ is closely tied up with gay identity. (Garber, 1992, p.4) Roger Baker makes a similar claim in *Drag, a History of Female Impersonation on the Stage*, when he states: "Ever since homosexuality became overt enough to warrant being written about, it has been closely associated in the public mind with drag." (Baker, 1968, p.24). Moreover, ethnographic research has shown that according to discourse of drag performances themselves, most drag queens are indeed homosexual men (McNeal, 1999). Furthermore, interviews with drag queens too seem to imply most queens are gay (Taylor and Rupp, 2004, p.113; McNeal, 1999, p.354). I will elaborate on this later.

To summarize, the working definition of drag used in this thesis is as follows: drag is a form of cross-dressing or transvestism. The most important aspects that separates the drag from other forms of cross-dressing is as follows: first of all, what sets drag aside from other forms of cross-dressing is that drag requires an audience – in fact, as stated above, its roots are in the performing arts. This makes drag a performance rather than an expression of an identity. In other words, unlike it is for a transsexual person, a drag performer's appearance is not necessarily an expression of a trans-gendered identity or feeling. This being rooted in the performing arts and its implicit need for an audience means that the audience knows it is a performance. It is aware that the drag queen is usually biologically male. Like Lorber stated above, the audience of the drag performance is in on the joke. The word joke here is not chosen lightly. Drag performance is usually meant to be entertaining and because of its aspects of parody quite often has a strong element of humour in it. The parody in drag is het exaggerated gender display of the opposite sex: usually it is about men performing as women in such a way it is obvious they are not real women. It is 'over the top'. In order for drag performance to be successful therefore, drag relies on a binary gender system. Lorber calls this a parody of otherness, meaning that drag performance is very aware of two distinct sexes and gender identities as well as gendered behaviour and taboos. It in fact uses these distinct features in order to parody the opposite sex. Finally, there is an inextricable connection between drag performance and (male) homosexuality. This is partly due to the implicit

⁴ Note: Garber claims drag, as a form of transvestism, is closely related to gay identity. My claim is that specifically drag is a gay prerogative; not that cross-dressing in general is.

connection between homosexuality and femininity, making gay men more aware of gendered taboos. This will become clear in this thesis.

DRAG 101: THEORIZING MEN IN DRESSES

We're all born naked and the rest is drag – RuPaul Charles

In the previous chapter, I formulated a definition of drag. This will be the definition used in this thesis. I have demonstrated how not all cross-dressing is drag. Moreover, I have argued that although not all drag queens are gay men, there is an undeniable connection between drag and gay male identity and history. In this chapter I will present an important text for this thesis on the empowering qualities on drag: *Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance*, written by anthropologist Keith McNeal in 1999. I will thereafter show how key texts within feminist academia, namely *Masculinities* by Raewyn Connell and Judith Butler's extensive and sophisticated theories of gender and performativity, can be read to clarify and elaborate on the text by McNeal. I will show that the power relations governing different masculinities can make clear why homosexuality and femininity are connected, and why both are considered subordinate or at least are rejected by patriarchy. Judith Butler's theory of performativity will then be used to explain how the sex/gender distinction and the absence of an essential gender identity can be used to lash out, pun intended, against the oppressive norms of our society.

Keith McNeal's 'Behind the Make Up' and the 'Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood' – How Drag Can Be Used to Retaliate Against Straight Hegemony

The key text on which this thesis builds was written by Keith McNeal. *Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance* was published in *Ethos* in 1999, at which time McNeal was a graduate student. For this paper he was awarded the 1998 Richard Condon Award for best graduate student paper in Psychological Anthropology. McNeal received a Ph.D. in Anthropology in 2004 since, and has published several texts on religion and ritual performance (McNeal, n.d.). The paper he wrote on drag performance I argue is a pivotal one, as it is the only work available that specifically engages with drag performance as a strategy for retaliating against hegemony and in that hints toward drag as a strategy for empowerment. It needs to be pointed out, however, that drag has been

the topic of research concerning its subversive and transgressive qualities with regard to sex, gender and sexuality (see Taylor and Rupp, 2004, 2005; Niles, 2004). I will elaborate on his text below to demonstrate why according to McNeal there is a need for retaliation and empowerment, and how that can be brought about through performing drag.

McNeal presents his ethnographic research done in a United States drag club to demonstrate, among other topics, how drag can function “as a gendered ritual of rebellion whose patterns of symbolic inversion are particularly resonant with the culturally generated ambivalence of gay men in the United States” (p. 345). In his study, he claims that drag is an act of rebellion, because the drag queen is the representative of the “stigmatized gay male gender” and as such retaliates against “straight audience members”, providing catharsis for a gay audience (p. 347) – arguably, the symbolic inversion alleviates feelings and experiences of subordination with the gay audience. With regard to the symbolic inversion he mentions that “drag is a domain of culturally mediated expressive action characterized by emotionally charged communicative exchange and catharsis” (p. 346). He furthermore explains:

Here they observe and indeed laugh together at what society tells them they are. In the drag show, it seems that we encounter a silent, intersubjective agreement on the part of audience members in which the drag queens unabashedly act out and perform on stage many of the conflicts, attributions, and ambivalence of being gay and male in the United States. For these few moments, the “femininity” attributed to gay men is not stigmatized and ashamed, but in control and assertive, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world.

McNeal, 1999, p. 346-347.

In other words, McNeal argues that being gay and male in the United States, and arguably, in the Western world at large, is problematic because of attributions of femininity. Later on in this thesis I will elaborate extensively on how this attributed femininity comes to pass by drawing on Connell’s theory of masculinities. The drag show, he claims, is a safe environment in which this attributed femininity can be performed in such a way that it is in control and assertive, rather than problematic and a source of (inner) conflicts. I argue that the femininity is enlarged, i.e. exaggerated, and used almost as a ‘weapon’. As such, this femininity can be

used to retaliate against a hegemonic straight world, which is represented in the drag show by the straight audience. All this, McNeal importantly adds, is done in relative safety, because the drag queen is “also “not me”” (McNeal, 1999, p. 347), meaning that the drag queen is a persona and as such, the person ‘behind the make up’ maintains a safe distance from the precarious matters being dealt with.

However, McNeal makes quite clear that drag is not purely liberating and cathartic, but that there is also a somewhat darker side to it: “at certain moments, the self-hate that often characterizes gay male subjectivity emerges as misogyny expressed by the drag queen” (McNeal, 1999, p. 347). The crux to understanding the self-hate that McNeal argues is often experienced by gay men, is what he calls the double-bind of gay selfhood (ibid. p. 349). By this he means that in contemporary Western society boys are told to be masculine because of their biological sex and at the same time that they are feminine because of their homosexuality, as we have seen earlier. This leads to an inner conflict and that is problematic for them (ibid. p. 369); they poke fun at themselves for being feminine, but also at women, who arguably embody femininity, too:

[G]ay male stigma derives not only from transgressing the hetero-normative bounds of masculinity, but also because femininity is considered inferior in sexist culture. Gay men have responded to this situation not only by poking fun at the world, but also by poking fun at themselves and at women who occupy a similar, though not equivalent, psychocultural position in relation to men concerning matters of desire.

McNeal, 1999, p. 347.

In fact, McNeal states that the double-bind of gay selfhood can lead to profound gender ambivalence, and that drag is a set of practices that corresponds with that ambivalence (McNeal, 1999, p. 365). That is to say, that the drag performance in itself is ambivalent with regard to gender: earlier I have pointed out that an important trademark of drag is that it is a joke the audience is in on – the audience knows that the person they see before them is actually a man performing femininity. In this sense, McNeal makes the claim that the gender ambivalence possibly experienced by gay men can be a reason for doing drag, making drag a gay prerogative.

Finally, McNeal makes a claim against a simplified view of drag as subversive with regard to gender the sex/gender dualism, stating that ritualized catharsis should not be confused with resistance (McNeal, 1999, p. 348). In fact, drag cannot be without gendered stereotypes and a binary gender system like I have pointed out in the previous chapter. In other words, the parody of Otherness I coined there, cannot exist without the Other.

In the above section I have expounded my reading of McNeal's paper. I have explained how drag can be an act of rebellion, retaliating against straight audience members watching the drag queen, thusly providing catharsis for a gay audience. I have demonstrated that the reason for this rebellion is the femininity attributed to gay men, while that same femininity is simultaneously utilized to retaliate against a hegemonic straight society, i.e. a straight audience. The accusation of femininity however could lead to a double-bind of gay selfhood, or an inner conflict regarding their gender. The self hate that emerges from this double-bind is expressed in self-parody as well as possibly in misogyny.⁵

In the following section I will be drawing on theories of masculinity in order to make clear why femininity is attributed to gay men, and why that is possibly problematic.

On McNeal's Concept of Double-Bind and the Subordinate Position of Gay Men:

Raewyn Connell's Masculinities

In the groundbreaking 1995 work 'Masculinities', Raewyn Connell conceptualizes the up until then rather unexplored and unmarked category of men and masculinities. Masculinities, as sets of prescribed gendered behaviour for men, are introduced by her in a plurality. They exist on the intersection of sex, race, class, nationality and place in the world (Connell, 2005, p. 75) and arguably, that list is by no means finite. Connell argues that several masculinities are recognized, and names but a few: working class masculinities, black masculinities, gay masculinities, and so forth. She warns however against oversimplification of masculinities and points out the importance of their interdependent power relations (ibid.). She distinguishes four categories, or types of power relations, which I will elaborate on here in order to lay the groundwork for showing how femininity and homosexuality have become intertwined in a contemporary Western context, in the next section.

Every culture has its own exalted cultural ideal of what 'real' men are and how they should

⁵ Arguably, expressing misogyny while performing femininity could be seen as self-parody or self-hate: you are in fact ridiculing something that you are yourself at that moment.

behave. In reality, not many men live up to these high standards, and quite often they are not much more than symbols in the form of, for example, movie characters (Connell, 2005, p. 77). An important aspect of this exalted masculinity is that it is a presumed legitimization of patriarchy and that it guarantees male dominance. Hence, this type of masculinity is everything femininity is not. It is in fact the very rejection of femininity. This concept of patriarchy is very important, and I will elaborate on it later on. This cultural ideal is what Connell calls 'hegemonic masculinity' (ibid.). Of this, she writes: "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (ibid.).

Opposite this hegemonic masculinity is the concept of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Somewhat simplified; this is everything hegemonic masculinity is not whilst still being male. According to Connell, at least in Western society, gay men are seen as the epitome of subordinate masculinity. Connell states: "gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity" (Ibid., emphasis added). "Masculinities constructed in ways that realize patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense," says Connell (2005, p. 79). Complicit masculinity can be seen as the group of men who do not quite live up to hegemony, who do not embody hegemonic masculinity, yet support it nonetheless by embracing the ideal, thus becoming accomplices to the legitimization of patriarchy. This entails most men, she claims.

Marginalized masculinity is the group of men who can never reach the ideal of hegemony, as a result of the intersection between their sex and gender, and some marginalized aspect of their identity, i.e. being non-white: "Marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group. Thus, in the United States, particular black athletes may be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity. But the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down effect; it does not yield social authority to black men generally" (Connell, 2005. p. 81).

Connell explicitly states that relations mentioned above are not fixed identities or character types but that they are relations generated in particular locations and situations (Connell,

2005, p. 81). Yet, in particular the concept of the position gay men take up within a patriarchal society like ours, is an interesting and particular helpful notion when studying drag queens and drag as a strategy for empowerment, in the sense that it helps ground the perceived subordinate position in theory. Moreover, it clarifies McNeal's somewhat unexplained concept of the "stigmatized gay male gender" and thus provides an explanation for the perceived need of a "retaliation against a hegemonic straight world" I mentioned above. Understanding the notion of patriarchy and its connection to heterosexuality, as well as its implicit rejection of femininity, will make the subordinate position of gay men clear. I will therefore elaborate on these notions in the following section.

Why Homosexuality is Considered 'Subordinate': Patriarchy and Compulsory Heterosexuality

We have seen how gay men are considered subordinate with regard to their position in the wide field of power relations of masculinities, according to McNeal and Connell. This subordinate position is closely tied up with the femininity attributed to gay masculinities. Moreover, we have seen that femininity is rejected in patriarchal societies, explaining the position of gay masculinities. In this section, I want to explore some of the reasons why femininity, and with it, homosexuality, is rejected, and why femininity is associated with male homosexuality.

A very important notion of hegemonic masculinity, as I mentioned above, is that it is a legitimization of patriarchy. Patriarchy, literally meaning 'the rule of the fathers' is a concept that is often encountered in feminist discourse, and can loosely be defined as the social construct that encompasses all systems of male dominance over women (Tickner, 2001). All cultures known to us at this point are arguably patriarchal, and its opposite, matriarchy, is unlikely to have ever existed in known human history (Bamberger, 1974; Kelley, 1994).

It is clear to see how a patriarchal society has a vested interest in (or actually produces) hegemonic masculinity: hegemonic masculinity is a set of power relations that reinforces its own position of power, since it legitimizes patriarchy and with it male dominance over women. It is clear that there is a very close connection between patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity.

The connection between hegemony and heterosexuality then is almost a natural one: for the reproduction of patriarchy, heterosexuality is required: "Gay masculinities, for example, are

subordinated to the hegemonic model because their object of sexual desire undermines the institution of heterosexuality, which is of primary importance for the reproduction of patriarchy” (Demetriou, 2001, p. 344). This explains how patriarchy requires heterosexuality and simultaneously rejects homosexuality: in order to maintain patriarchy (and society at large), offspring is required. And that requires at least some form of heterosexuality. This required reproduction creates compulsory heterosexuality, a term coined by Adrienne Rich (1981). This is a system that demands heterosexuality through cultural signifiers and does so in such a manner that heterosexuality is presumed, i.e. it becomes the norm. Other forms of sexuality are labelled deviant or rendered invisible (Rich, 2003, p. 13). So, homosexuality too is rejected.

Not only does homosexuality thwart reproduction of patriarchy and in doing so goes against the connected notion of compulsory heterosexuality, but as homosexual men are sexually attracted to masculinity (i.e. men), they must be feminine in some way – since gender is inextricably connected to sexual object choice (McNeal, 1999; Bolin, 1996), as well as according to a strong cultural conception that opposites attract:

Patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity. This idea is expressed in an extraordinary variety of ways, ranging from stale humour of the limp-wrist, panty-waist variety, to sophisticated psychiatric investigations of the ‘aetiology’ of homosexuality in childhood. The interpretation is obviously linked to the assumption our culture generally makes about the mystery of sexuality, that opposites attract. If someone is attracted to the masculine, then that person must be feminine – if not in the body, then somehow in the mind.

Connell, 2005, p. 143.

The cultural notion that opposites attract is so strong, that it indeed played an important part in theorizing homosexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Medical discourse spoke of a condition called ‘sexual inversion’ meaning homosexual people were somehow thought to occupy the body of the opposite sex, somewhat like the contemporary notion of a transsexual identity (Ellis and Addington Symonds, 2008). This example illustrates how the notion that opposites attract (and with it compulsory heterosexuality) is so

embedded in our culture that even when something deviating from it occurs, it is either seen as the exception to the rule and therefore needs to be analyzed and categorized or it is made to fit the discourse of 'opposites attract' by implementing theories like inversion.

To sum it up, there are several reasons for the subordinate position of gay men in our society. Homosexual attraction is in blatant disregard to the cultural concept that opposites attract. Moreover, yet connected to that, it is considered to endanger patriarchy by not reproducing it. I argue that the femininity gay men are accused works as follows: the compulsory construct that claims that opposites attract, expressed and maintained in Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality, states that male erotic object choice implies femininity in at least the subject. This femininity then, is rejected by 'patriarchy/hegemonic masculinity' because, as Connell has argued, it is everything masculinity is not.

On McNeal's Strategy of Retaliation: How That Can Be Done According to Butler's Performativity

Drawing on theories of masculinities and compulsory heterosexuality, I have clarified, and elaborated on, McNeal's theory, in which he argues that gay men take up a subordinate position in the web of power relations that govern masculinities and that they are therefore considered 'subordinate' and as a result they are marginalized in contemporary Western culture. As we have seen, he goes on explaining that the very reason for their marginalization, their presumed femininity, can be used to retaliate against hegemony through the use of drag. In the following section I will demonstrate how the performance of one's gender according to Judith Butler is closely connected with Connell's masculinities. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the theory of gender performativity explains how drag can be used to retaliate against a hegemonic society.

Gender, it has been extensively argued, is not the same as sex. Simone de Beauvoir for example teaches us that a woman is not born but rather is made into woman. De Beauvoir refers to the distinction between sex and gender when saying: "not every female human being is necessarily a woman" (De Beauvoir, 2010, p. 3). Woman is defined by what she is not; namely a man. The female needs to embody (or perform, to speak with Butler, as we will see later on) femininity to become a woman. Unlike a man: the man is Absolute, woman is Other

(ibid. p. 6). What De Beauvoir describes here, is how gender is separate from sex and how gender is constructed, rather than inborn.

However, it goes further than a distinction between sex and gender. Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity, but rather consists of “stylized repetition of acts” and the “stylization of the body”. All this constitutes an illusion of a stable gender identity. An identity the actors themselves and the ‘social audience’ come to believe (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Furthermore, she claims that the way in which we perform this gender, creates an illusion of an essential, discrete gender: “Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable” (Ibid. p. 528).

Importantly, failing to perform one’s gender ‘right’ initiates punishment and marginalization by society:

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.

Judith Butler, 1988, p. 528.

Butler does not elaborate on what these punishments entail, but it is not difficult to imagine the many ways in which society enforces certain norms upon men and women regarding behaviour, appearance, vocabulary and so forth.

This is where the afore mentioned masculinities from Connell come in. Arguably, hegemonic masculinity could be considered the perfect performance of one’s gender. A perceived man, performing his gender in such a way that he is seen as a ‘real’, archetypical man, embodies the cultural ideal, the culturally exalted masculinity, and creates the perfect illusion of gender essentialism. Gay men are therefore part of the margins because they perform their gender ‘wrong’. They are considered feminine, because they are attracted to masculinity, as I have

demonstrated. Since object choice is connected to gender (McNeal, 1999; Bolin, 1996), gay men perform femininity purely by object choice already. There is no need for a gay man to be effeminate in order for him to be considered feminine: he is performing femininity by proxy and is thus performing his masculinity 'wrong'.

Not only is one punished for performing gender wrong, but, at least in the case of men, also rewarded for performing it 'right', i.e. perfect performance is hegemonic. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is closely tied to institutional power, and claims that is the reason why top levels of business, military and governmental organisation remain largely unshaken by women and feminism (2005, p. 77). In other words, hegemonic masculinity, or the perfect performance of maleness, is quite simply often rewarded with success. The ones that perform their gender 'wrong', that do not live up to the expectations culture and society has of them, however, are subordinate and marginalized, as mentioned. In analogy with the 'right' performance being hegemonic, I argue that performing ones gender 'wrong' is a hallmark of subordinate masculinity.

Earlier, I mentioned how, according to McNeal, the performance of drag can be used by gay men to retaliate against a straight world, i.e. straight audience, and through it against hegemonic straight society. He argues that "[...] the gay male life-course is characterized by a dialectic of transgression and conformity stemming from conflict derived from both masculine and feminine self-representations [...]" (1999, p. 344), which he named the double-bind of gay selfhood, and states that the stage is the place where drag queens can act out and comment on the conflicts and ambivalence of being gay. This is the only time where for the gay man being feminine is not punished or ridiculed, but empowering and an almost aggressive way of criticizing the status quo (ibid., p. 246-347).

To speak with Foucault, drag is seen as a way of altering power relations. Power is exercised over homosexual men. The very concepts of hegemony and subordination already express their underlying power relations. Power is exercised over homosexual men when they perform homosexuality, when they perform their gender 'wrong'. As Foucault states, power in itself does not exist, it is 'an action upon an action' (Foucault, 1983, p. 220). Power is all about relations, action and reaction. It is not static, not fixed. This explains how in a certain context, such as while doing drag, the power relations can shift.

And that is how retaliation through performativity works: the gay man transforms, embodies the femininity attributed to him, and performs it better than a woman would,⁶ effectively mocking the system of gender essentialism (Butler, 2006, p. 186). He takes what makes him subordinate, embodies and performs it, and then she lets it work for her. Quite literally are the power relations then inverted. The drag queen is on a stage, sometimes even physically above her audience. She stands in a spotlight, while the audience sits in the dark. She performs a femininity that is so feminine, not even a woman can live up to it.

The very concept of the drag queen as we know her today, cannot possibly have come to be without these power relations, without the subordinate position of femininity and the existence of men who are perceived as feminine.

⁶ Whereby I mean that drag performance is an exaggerated gender display, as I have demonstrated in chapter 1.

DRAG AS A STRATEGY OF EMPOWERMENT: FOUR EXEMPLARY INTERVIEWS

A girl should be two things: who and what she wants – Coco Chanel

In this chapter I will analyze the interviews I have done with the drag queens. I will demonstrate how for each of the four queens drag can be considered empowering in different ways. After that, I will explore possible empowering qualities that occurred in all four.

Marcella: On Creating the Self and Being in Control

Marcella, the persona of Marcel (38) is a fierce and funny queen. She is very dedicated to her art and extremely creative: I have seen her wearing wigs made out of sponges and other weird materials like duct-tape. Currently, she is taking couture classes and was indeed sewing during our interview. Marcel works in healthcare. His favourite past-time is crochet.

For Marcella, drag is a powerful creative tool. Even as a child, Marcel was always creating something. Whether it was sculpting things out of clay, making drawings or colouring in colouring books or other creative handy works, the drag-queen-to-be was always busy making things. Creativity for Marcella is an important part of drag. And even though she says she is not taking the couture classes because of her drag, so she could



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make her own dresses and garments, she does say that the classes are basically an extension of her drag because of her inner drive to create. Drag, she says, is a great way of showing

people what you created.

As a child, Marcel recalls being bullied for not living up to the expectations people had of him regarding his behaviour and preferences. He was often accused of being somewhat feminine, and tells me that he was a 'soft' boy who liked My Little Ponies and Care Bears. He had a distaste for noisy toys, and in television series like She-ra and in fairy tales he was largely drawn to strong female characters like princesses and witches. He recalls preferring long, golden hair, beautiful dresses and fantastic unicorns over the bulky, muscular He-man. Even today he has a distaste for overly muscular and masculine men. Although it was easier for him to identify with the female characters, as a person he strongly identifies as a cis-gendered man, he tells me. He thinks of himself as 'a man in a man's body'. Marcel mentioned he hated being called 'somewhat feminine' as a child because he was 'just Marcel' and says he was just a little 'differently masculine',⁷ unlike his older brother, who was 'regular masculine'.⁸ In our conversation, he did refer to himself as being somewhat feminine, but adds he does not care much for labels such as femininity and masculinity. It was clear to me that Marcel had put a lot of thought into the concepts of masculinity and femininity, despite his claim not to care for those labels. I asked Marcel what 'regular masculine' is and he ironically reminded me of his heterosexual brother, who is a fire-fighter. Jokingly he added that his brother was straight, and therefore became a fire-fighter, and that he himself was gay and therefore became a drag queen.

There are striking resemblances between Marcel's concepts of 'differently masculine' and 'regular masculine' and Connell's notions of hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity like described in the second chapter of this thesis. Like the concepts from Connell, it seems Marcel considers them to be opposites. Moreover, when asked what 'regular masculine' means, he answered that that is the type of masculinity you see on television, and reminded me that his 'regular masculine' brother is a fire-fighter. Arguably, and moreover taken from the tone of his remark, a fire-fighter is a cultural signifier of hegemonic masculinity. The notion that this type of masculinity is something "you see on television", too, strikingly resembles Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity, which is the cultural epitome of masculinity hardly ever lived up to, but communicated to us through symbols like movie stars. Furthermore, Marcel jokingly and matter-of-factly states that 'regular' or hegemonic

⁷ From the interview: "anders-mannelijk".

⁸ From the Interview: "standaard-mannelijk".

masculinity is reserved for straight men, when he says that his brother was straight and therefore became a fire-fighter. Importantly, 'different-masculine' is considered feminine and gay, when he says that he became a drag queen because he is gay.

Marcel later on in the interview tells me he was bullied because he was 'differently masculine'. He does however recognize this feminine side now, and says it is what he enlarges and is in control of while in drag. Control seems to be a major empowering quality of drag, for Marcella. In the interview she makes clear how every detail of her appearance is under her control. Her look is thought-through and she controls everything about it, from the shape of her face to the clothes she is wearing. But Marcella is not only in control of how she looks. As an entertainer, she is in control of her audience. If she plays them right, they laugh when she wants them to. Moreover, it is her task to lead them to believe something that is not true: that she is a woman. In fact, for her, an important part of drag is about being in control, she tells me. She plays a role and it is all her, she is completely in control of that role. She says that if you play it right, you take people along in a fantasy, in another reality and that you can make people experience something. For her, that means being in control. And it appears the control she feels goes beyond making people believe in a fantasy. Marcella enjoys creating a fantasy, but she creates it. And as its creator, it is up to her how long the fantasy lasts. She thoroughly enjoys doing something 'un-feminine' to shock people. She explains that people expect her to stay in-character, but that the greatest moments happen when she confuses people, something she does often. She gave a delightful example of breaking the fantasy:

Marcella: Or like, taking out a boob.

Sven: [laughs]

Marcella: I always have these, sort of, sponge boobs right, that people are like, oh, are you hot too? And I'm like, oh, yeah, terribly! [He pretends to take a breast from an imaginary bra and uses it to wipe his face]

Sven: [laughs] And then wipe your face with it! Isn't that killing for your make up? Wiping your face with your boob?

Marcella: [shocked] No, I don't actually wipe! [both laugh]⁹

⁹ Marcella: of inderdaad zeg maar een tiet eruit halen zeg maar

Sven: [lacht]

Marcella: Ik heb altijd van die, ik heb van die sponstieten he, dat mensen zeggen o, heb jij het ook zo warm? Ik zo, o, bloedheet.

Sven: [lacht] En dan deppen. Toch killing voor je make up, deppen met je tiet.

Marcella: [geschrokken] Nee, ik dep niet echt! [beide lachen]

In drag, it seems, Marcel has found an outlet of sorts for the femininity that has been attributed to him since childhood. He takes this femininity and enlarges it, creating an illusion she is in control of. She says:

Because it, and now it is no longer just political but starting to be philosophical, because I just... I am in control. I have the possibility to voluntarily take up a role which does something to other people, who then look at me differently, and I start behaving differently and it makes me feel different.. And all of that because of a thin layer, well, maybe not a thin layer, a thin layer of make up.¹⁰

For Marcella, drag seems to be empowering in the sense that she is in control of her appearance and her direct environment. The very thing she used to be bullied for and was not in control of at that time is her attributed femininity. In Marcella, Marcel is able to use his creative skill to enlarge this femininity and make it a tool for control. She has experienced the subordinate site of masculinity when she was bullied for not living up to expectation and considered feminine. She calls this position she was, or is, in 'differently-masculine', a term with a striking resemblance to what Connell calls subordinate masculinity. Moreover, she recognizes how this type of masculinity exists opposite of 'regular masculine', of hegemonic masculinity. She jokingly stated that her subordinate masculinity and with it her homosexuality were reasons for doing drag. Her femininity is enlarged by changing the shape of her face to a more feminine shape, by the clothes she wears, and, she told me, by taking up a more feminine posture. This exaggerated feminine persona is her creation, and through it she is in control of her audience. As we have seen in chapter two, McNeal says of this: "For these few moments, the 'femininity' attributed to gay men is not stigmatized and ashamed, but in control and assertive, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world" (McNeal, 1999, p. 347). The retaliation McNeal speaks of comes in the form of Marcella's power to break the fantasy as she pleases, essentially mocking gender-essentialism like Butler argues, as well as in the concept of control itself. The subordinate masculinity experienced by Marcel is enlarged in Marcella and is what makes her in control, successfully shifting power relations. In this light we can explain the experience Marcel often has after the un-wigging, when she becomes a he

¹⁰ Omdat het en nou wordt het niet alleen politiek maar dan wordt het bijna filosofisch, omdat ik gewoon. Ik heb de controle ik heb het vermogen om vrijwillig in een rol te springen die dan iets doet met andere mensen die dan op een andere manier naar mij kijken ik ga me op een andere manier gedragen, krijg daardoor andere reacties en ga me daardoor anders voelen en alleen maar door een heel dun laagje, nou niet heel dun laagje, door een dun laagje make-up.

again and enters the same room he just was in in drag. At that point, he often feels ignored and no longer in control and admired. Marcel refers to this as the glamour-drop. This is the point where everything returns to 'normal'. He is no longer in control of the situation – without the attention he gets as a drag queen, there is no fantasy to create or break, rendering him powerless. The very word glamour-drop implies a downgrade in experience: he is adored in drag. He feels like a star: his performance of femininity is working for him instead of against him – like it used to as a child, and maybe still does in daily life in the form of McNeal's double-bind. At the same time, the performance is safe. Marcel notes that drag is theatre and that he is playing a role. He even made Marcella into a 'dumb blonde' so he can pretend not to understand possible insults, he tells me. This makes him less vulnerable and lessens control exerted over him. In some sense, he is immune to possible 'punishment' for performing his gender wrong, since his persona can divert it. Marcella both is and is not Marcel: the drag queen, McNeal says, is also "not me" (1999, p. 347).

The Queen with No Name: Embodying Otherness and Clearing the Path for Future Drags

Thomas has not yet thought up a name for his persona. He says he is 'not a real drag queen' since he has not performed on a stage in drag. Yet. He is 23 years old and he recently



Photo courtesy of Thomas

graduated. He runs his own business in graphic design. Thomas is not a queen to mess with – part of her drag is contributing to visibility and opening the road for future drags by fighting ignorance through the use of large amounts of make-up.

Thomas told me a delightful story of a run in he had with a couple of kids in the small town he lives in. The boys apparently disapproved of the way she looked and came up to her to file their complaints. However, drawing near they realized they were dealing with a drag queen of well over two meters in height and they

decided to vent their issues elsewhere. Had it come to a fight, Thomas assured me, they would have been on the floor within seconds. Despite her ten centimetre stiletto heels.

Thomas came into contact with drag through his dancing school at a young age. Carefully trying out his skills he decided his first appearance in drag would be at carnival, nice and safe, since everyone already looks weird then. Then, through tutorials on YouTube and a lot of practice, she perfected her skills and now she can often be found in one of the local bars. In drag, of course.

Thomas too tells me early on in the interview he has had somewhat of a difficult childhood. Although his home situation was fine, he was bullied a lot in school – at one time to the point

of having to be admitted to the hospital. Thomas, like Marcel, reports being bullied for alleged femininity. From an early age he danced and this was something his peers had some issues with. He recalls being called a 'faggot'¹¹ and a girl for being involved in dancing and tells me the tragic story that at one point someone threatened to cut his throat if he would not act 'normal' soon. He does not feel he was effeminate, and hastens to wonder out loud whether children can even be called effeminate at all. He remembers playing with everything from Barbie-dolls to Action Men-figures. In his experience, the history of being bullied made him into what he is today. He does not pay too much attention to what others might think of him, but he is very sensitive to injustice. More than once he states that an important reason for him to do drag is to make it easier for future drag queens: maybe, so he figures, people will be less judgemental of them if they have seen a drag queen before. He gladly takes up that responsibility. It is his believe that people pick on other people out of ignorance. Through drag, he is trying to show that everyone is different.

For this queen, doing drag is specifically a form of theatre, and with it, very much a form of escapism and a defence mechanism. He in fact states that the make up can be seen as a protective layer.

Interestingly, his drag-persona allows Thomas to do things he normally would not do and dare things he generally would not dare to do. He says that while in drag, you are a different character, another person, and that allows him to do things she normally would not or exaggerate certain aspects of himself. The funny thing is, he mentions, is that people usually accept that when he is in drag – specifically in drag. He could, of course, decide to dress up like a clown or some other random character to hide behind, he says. Thomas' go-to persona is female however, and he seems to draw strength from the drag queen archetype, which is a symbol that has certain cultural associations and meanings attributed to it.¹² For him, the drag queen is a strong person, winning arguments largely with words:

Thomas: I mean, every drag queen you make fun of.. You'd better be prepared to

¹¹ "mietje"

¹² This is mentioned by McNeal, too, when he writes: "Drag performance, moreover, is rebellious because the drag queen, as a culturally prominent representative of stigmatized gay male gender, rules her court and retaliates against unsuspecting straight audience members. It is in this regard that the symbolic inversion of the drag show provides catharsis for those gay men present who enjoy and laugh as the personification of their own stigma takes undisputed control over her court" (McNeal, 1999, p. 347-348). The archetype of the drag queen can almost be seen as some sort of saviour in this quote: representing the subordinate gays and retaliating in force.

have a shitload of remarks come your way. You will be read¹³ from, from the ends of your hair to the tips of your toes. Every minor flaw they can find will be put out in the open.¹⁴

But there is another side to the hiding behind the archetype. In Thomas' case it is not merely a matter of creating a safe distance from were to safely 'fight the good fight'. I already mentioned it is a form of escapism, too. It is a way of stepping out of the life of everyday and creating a fantasy for yourself. Of this, he says that this is a possible empowering quality of drag. In the following citation he answers my question whether drag is a gay prerogative or not. Clearly, he feels it is, because he feels gay people usually have had some tough experiences. Drag, he says, can for them be a way to escape from it all:

Thomas: I think the gay scene appropriated it.

Sven: Yeah.

Thomas: Er, how do I put this, it's, specifically it is because of the kids who have had a difficult childhood, and who want to escape their way of life.

Sven: Yeah.

Thomas: So they choose a different character. Another persona in which to hide themselves, in which they can do whatever they want and be themselves. So, when you're like, I'm just a street kid and I live from begging and if you want to escape that life at night, you can put on a dress and put on a wig and you can say you're Marilyn Monroe and that you performed in New York, and if at that moment you believe it, then it's like that. You can have the life you want as your persona. And because the gay scene never has it easy and because they lean toward femininity every now and then.. I think for them it's easy to embrace that femininity and that's why they appropriated it.¹⁵

¹³ "Reading" is a concept in the tradition of Paris is Burning and RuPaul's Drag Race. It is a way of insulting people, usually other drag queens, by explicitly stating the flaws in their appearance or character, usually to win the favour of a the laughing crowd.

¹⁴ Thomas: Ik bedoel, elke drag queen die jij belachelijk maakt dan moet je echt voorbereid zijn om een shitload aan opmerkingen terug te krijgen, want je wordt dan echt van van van je uiterste haar tot het puntje van je tenen word je gelezen elke minpuntje dat er maar gevonden wordt dat wordt dan ook gelijk op tafel gegooid

¹⁵ Thomas: Ik vind dat de homoscene het zichzelf toegeëigend heeft.

Sven: Ja.

Thomas: Eigenlijk. Ehm eh hoe moet ik het zeggen, het is met name komt het door kinderen die een zware jeugd gehad hebben en die willen eigenlijk ontsnappen aan hun manier van leven.

Sven: Ja

Thomas: Dus kiezen ze een ander personage een ander alter ego waar ze zichzelf in kunnen verstoppen waarin ze wel kunnen doen en laten wat ze willen en kunnen zijn wie ze zijn dus als jij zegt van ik ben eigenlijk maar een straatschoffie en ik leef van het bedelen en als jij 's avonds aan je leven wil ontsnappen dan trek je een jurk aan en zet je een pruik op en ik ben Marilyn Monroe en ik heb opgetreden in New York en jij geloof dat op dat moment, dan is dat zo. En jij kunt dat leven leiden wat je wil als je alter ego. En omdat de gay scene het toch wel altijd zwaar heeft en omdat die toch wel neigen naar de vrouwelijk kant af en toe, denk ik dat het voor hun ehm makkelijk is om daar naartoe te grijpen en hebben ze het zich daarom toegeëigend.

As Thomas sees it, drag can actually be a way to escape from a difficult life or a problem – you can actually be someone else for a short while. And that being he takes seriously. Thomas is the only one of the drag queens I interviewed who, although identifying as cis-gendered, actually reports feeling like a woman while in drag. Drag for him is not only a parody of Otherness, he embodies Otherness. During the interview, she never talked about herself in the sense of ‘being in drag’. In stead, she phrased it as ‘being a woman’. He states he feels like a woman as soon he has the make-up and the wig on, and is wearing the stilettos. Especially those, he says. For him, the personality is in the shoes. He interrupts the interview to put them on, and I instantly see what he means: glittery pumps with a thirteen centimetre heel show that this queens is not afraid of anything, let alone heights.

Thomas creates a character that does and dares more that he himself does – even though Thomas did not come across as a shy man. Thomas persona, too, is ‘not me’; the persona exists at a safe distance from the precarious matters possibly being dealt with. In the case of Thomas, these matters concern injustice and ignorance. The empowering qualities of drag are utilized by her for the future of drag-hood. And for Thomas too, like it is for Marcella, there is a reason that his persona is female. It seems that he too has found a way to turn his weakness into a strength. There is a reason Thomas feels the need to make it easier for other people. Like no other he knows what it is like to be judged for not living up to expectations of masculinity and manhood – and at one point his very life was threatened because of it. The story Thomas tells me of the kids coming up to him, he tells me for a reason. In this event, the bullies backed off as soon as they saw how tall he actually was, with his high heel and hair. Of this Thomas says he is literally above them. His very appearance makes him stand tall above these kids, who could be considered representatives of hegemonic suppression. Drag is a way of turning femininity into a strength. That for which he was bullied, he now uses to intimidate his attackers and retaliate against hegemonic masculinity: the story I told earlier, ends in her chasing her attackers down the street in high heels, while people surrounding the scene laugh, clap and shout. The retaliation is literal.

It is striking that Thomas says that gay people have often had a difficult childhood. For him at least this seems to be true and indeed, the bullying he experienced was obviously related to femininity, which he seems to associate with being gay when he says that gay men have a tendency towards femininity. Not only does the femininity attributed to gay men produce the double-bind of gay selfhood that McNeal phrased: in the specific case of Thomas the

attributed femininity caused more direct physical and psychological damage. Yet, it is that experience of attributed femininity that is again utilized to retaliate against the hegemony and its fear of the unknown: Thomas will show a different path and he can take everything you throw at him. And all this while protecting others from what he went through. He expresses the explicit hope that people will give him a hard time for being in drag, so they will not do it to others. Drag allows him to do that from a safe distance and that makes it empowering. Yet Thomas takes it somewhat further. She is not merely 'not me', she is somebody else. Thomas identifies as a woman when in drag, not as a man in a dress. For him, it is the key to good theatre – and drag and theatre to him are the same.

Miss Phoenix: On Visibility and Personal Fulfilment

Miss Phoenix teaches economics in high school in daily life, and for that reason has requested



Photo courtesy of Miss Phoenix

not to include her name in this thesis. She is 33 years old and has done a lot of volunteering for COC, the largest Dutch LGBT¹⁶-rights organisation. She thinks drag greatly improves LGBT-visibility. Miss Phoenix started doing drag in 2009 out of sheer curiosity. She was already familiar with the concept from the gay scene and wondered what it would be like to put on a dress and get out there. After some initial awkwardness including secretly trying on dresses with a friend in a local H&M store on the maternity section, as the fitting rooms there are larger, Miss Phoenix was born during one of the largest gay events of the year in Nijmegen: the Pink Wednesday of the annual Nijmegen Summer Festival. The attention she got was astounding and although she does not do drag that often,

she is hooked.

Marcel and Thomas have shown how drag can be empowering: you are in control of your appearance and to some extent of your audience; you are 'not-you' and can in that way both escape from your everyday life as well as battle ignorance and injustice. Miss Phoenix demonstrates another way in which it can be empowering: the drag queen draws a lot of attention. Usually, people love it and want to take your picture: you are the star! Drag is fun! But do not mistake Miss Phoenix for a frivolous party queen bent on stardom: she is very aware of what drag does for the visibility of the LGBT-community.

¹⁶ LGBT is an abbreviation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The term is in constant flux as the unity of this group is constantly questioned, both from within and without. Recent versions can include queer, intersexual, questioning and a-sexual: LGBTQIQA. For this thesis, I chose the currently most common version.

Unlike the other drag queens I have interviewed, Miss Phoenix' youth was quite uneventful. She came out as a gay man at age 24, after moving to Nijmegen from the East of the Netherlands where she was, in her own words, 'the only gay in the village'. Of course, knowing that you are different somehow affects you, but Miss Phoenix reported no serious trouble like being bullied. His father was initially very unhappy with his son's sexuality: according to Miss Phoenix it was because he did not really know what it was - it was foreign to him. In time, his father learned to accept and support him. As a boy he was always quite aware of his posture and behaviour and made sure it was not 'too feminine', creating an experience of a double-bind of gay selfhood. Apparently, Miss Phoenix was aware of the femininity attributed to gay men and did her best not to be accused of it. She tells me she has always had a feminine side, and although it is not something she is ashamed of now, it used to be something that somewhat bothered her. He gives an example of never sitting with his legs crossed in class, because it would be considered 'too gay'. Moreover, he was always aware of his posture, and made sure his voice was low, avoiding getting too excited as that would raise the pitch of his voice. Miss Phoenix was always very aware of how she came across.

Yet things changed for Miss Phoenix. While she used to be invested in keeping up appearances and passing as straight, nowadays she would rather be considered an 'over the top' queer than being considered plain, she tells me. While his feminine side used to be something he repressed, nowadays he would rather people think he was feminine than 'plain' – which of course does not mean he flaunts it. He did however embrace it. He enthusiastically shows me his first dress and lets me try on his new pumps – on which I struggle to take a mere two steps. Miss Phoenix tells me that nowadays as a man, she is always looking at women's clothing while shopping, too.

And indeed, there is nothing plain about Miss Phoenix. Especially when she is out there, entertaining the crowd. Her eyes light up as she tells me about the first time she went out in drag, which was during the Summer Festival in Nijmegen on 'Pink Wednesday'. The people reacted like she was a star! What amazed her most about the experience, is that it was particularly the heterosexual crowd that wanted to take her picture. She thinks that for them a drag queen is a new sight, and that most gay people run into drags every now and again. But she is not really interested in why they keep taking pictures of her, she just loves it.

For Miss Phoenix, there seems to be some degree of personal fulfilment. Although she described how she is usually somewhat nervous before stepping into a crowd in drag and that it is definitely outside her comfort zone, she is also convinced that stepping outside your comfort zone is good for you. It is where the fun happens and you get to know yourself. In that way, drag for her is a means of personal growth. It is a new experience and she calls it an exploration of her feminine side. At one point, she remarks that baldness and wrinkles are never fun, but that the upside of getting older is that you get to know yourself better and better.

Miss Phoenix, too, wants to be noticed when she is in drag. In her words, you do not spend three hours on your look just to go stand in the corner of the dance floor. You want to be in the crowd. And usually, their response feels great:

Miss Phoenix: Well, and then you notice that when the crowd responds positively, you grow enormously. Your ego grows, my Miss Phoenix keep growing and growing.

Sven: Yeah.

Miss Phoenix: And er, er, well, I, er, I start to fly, somehow. Oh, the people like it! There are entertained, and I love that, and it makes me feel good. It makes me feel very good.¹⁷

In Miss Phoenix we have another example of how either experienced or attributed femininity is enlarged in order to take up a place in the spotlight, shifting power relations. Miss Phoenix revels in the attention she receives, specifically from a straight audience, and it makes her feel wonderful. The empowering qualities of drag for her work on a direct personal level. However, it does not stop there. As I mentioned before, Miss Phoenix is very aware of what drag can mean for the LGBT community. Even though she is not really aware of this while she is in drag, and it is not her primary reason for 'wiggling up'. Miss Phoenix feels that drags represent a minority and she happily takes up that part. She says that for example at a Gay Pride event everyone should be represented: gays, lesbians, transpeople, bisexuals, and drag queens. She feels drag is a minority in itself.

It is clear that the personal fulfilment drag gives Miss Phoenix is not all there is to it. It makes

¹⁷ Miss Phoenix: Nou, en dan merk je ook dat als het publiek positief op jou reageert, je gaat enorm groeien. Je ego wordt ook steeds groter, mijn Miss Phoenix wordt steeds groter.

Sven: Ja.

Miss Phoenix: En eh ehm he ik ik eh ik ga begin te vliegen ergens. O, de mensen vinden het leuk, en de mensen worden geëntertand en dat vind ik leuk hoor, en dat laat mij ook heel goed voelen. Ik voel mezelf ook heel erg goed.

her grow and she loves the attention, but she is aware of what she represents. And not only is Miss Phoenix increasing LGBT-visibility: through her charm she is determined to be a lovable and approachable representative, as she explains:

I think Miss Phoenix is very approachable. I'm not a.. I don't keep people at bay. I believe I'm a very friendly drag queen. Very approachable. I think. But what I do do, and people notice that... Miss Phoenix actually doesn't exist. You're a character. You see people who are like oh, and sometimes they're somewhat afraid to approach you. Then I will go to them, and I'll be like, well, you don't see that every day, do you? Or sometimes you see people who want to take your picture but are afraid to ask. Then I go up to them. If I see it, I go up to them. Because I think that er, it should be fun. I'm not a drag who sticks her nose in the air and er.. except when people are unpleasant.¹⁸

For Miss Phoenix empowerment is achieved on a more personal level. She too was vividly aware that gay men are considered feminine. In fact, before she was ready to come out, her strategy for not being recognized as a gay man was to maintain what can be considered a masculine posture and voice. In Miss Phoenix that femininity is explored, given space and enlarged, much to the pleasant surprise of the straight audience she encounters often. Miss Phoenix is an approachable queen who would rather take a picture with her straight admirers. As such, she is not poking fun at her audience providing catharsis for a gay audience, as McNeal theorized (1999, p. 347). However, her approachability and charm are a very positive way of drawing attention for the LGBT-community. At the same time drag for her is a way of seeking out new experiences, achieving personal growth and pleasure and achieve some personal fame. It lifts her up and empowers her personally. Miss Phoenix, who used to try to steer clear of accusations of femininity, now embraces and deepens that side of her, tapping into what used to be a fear, to achieve self-knowledge, self-fulfilment and at the same time make a powerful statement as a loveable representative of the oppressed and the disenfranchised. Almost like she is rising from the ashes. She feels LGBT's are a minority and

¹⁸ Hoe ik denk dat Miss Phoenix overkomt op het publiek dus. Ik denk dat Miss Phoenix heel erg benaderbaar is. Ik ben geen [...] ik houd mensen niet op afstand. Ik vind mezelf heel vriendelijk als drag. Ik ben heel benaderbaar. Denk ik hoor. [...] Maar wat ik wel doe en dat merken mensen ook, Miss Phoenix bestaat eigenlijk niet. En je zet iets neer. Je ziet mensen van oh, en die durven dan niet veel. Dan stap ik ernaartoe, en dan zeg ik van goh, dat zie je ook niet elke dag eh of dat je dan mensen ziet van eh eigenlijk wil ik wel een foto van maken maar ik durf niet zo goed. Dan ga ik ernaar toe. Als ik het zie ga ik er naar toe. Want ik vind wel eh het moet leuk zijn. Ik ben geen drag die met opgeheven hoofd eh... Tenzij mensen vervelend doen.

drag is a way of giving them a fabulous and kind face.

Lady Galore: In Service of LGBT

Lady Galore is a well-known drag queen from Amsterdam. Her given name is Sander den Baas (30). Of the four queens I interviewed, she is the only full-time drag queen, in the sense that it



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is her job. For Lady Galore, LGBT-rights and visibility are a major part of her drag. And those are not just hollow words, either. She has recently won Het Roze Lieverdje, an award for people who in some way contributed to LGBT-emancipation, and is one of three ambassadors for the 2014 Amsterdam Gay Pride. For her, an important part of drag is having a specific goal with dressing up. And that specific goal is usually in service of LGBT.

Lady Galore is no stranger to the fame drag can bring. Not only does she tell me how convenient it is that people in crowded places tend to make space for her as she tries to pass, an experience Sander unfortunately does not have so

much, drag seems to be somewhat profitable, too. Lady Galore, she says, never has to pay for her drinks.

This queen knows the perks of drag. In fact, she tells me at some point she had to create more space for Sander in her life, and remind herself that he needs attention and clothes too. As a result she tries to keep the two lives separate, even physically: the interview is done in the Galore-room, surrounded by wigs, nails, jewellery and plastic crates with gowns and dresses. It is almost as if Sander and Lady Galore are two different people.

Like it does for the other queens I interviewed, femininity plays a role in the life of Lady GaAt age 15 Sander came out. He was thrown out of her house by his mother the next day. In school too, Sander was bullied for feminine traits. He says he was called gay before he even knew he was gay himself. Although he does not explicitly refer to himself as feminine, he

definitely felt he was different from other boys. He paints the picture of a gentle, quiet boy who liked to play with dolls and barbies. He remarks he just had less testosterone than other boys. When I ask him why he thinks 'gay' is a curse word, the association between homosexuality and femininity becomes clearer:

Lady Galore: Well, macho men obviously don't want to be with a man, er.. So yeah, then it's a curse word.

Sven: Gay is not macho? By definition? It is non-macho?

Lady Galore: No, we can't be macho's. [laughs]¹⁹

The connection between femininity and homosexuality is almost a natural one for Sander. Testosterone, the male hormone, is implicitly connected to masculine behaviour by him, i.e. asserting oneself, while a presumed lack of it is associated with being gentle and playing with dolls. McNeal argued how the double-bind of gay selfhood came from an inner conflict that tells the gay man he should be masculine because of his sex, but that he is feminine because of his orientation. We see this in Sander when he tells me about his lack of testosterone, implying that although he is male, something about him is different. Moreover, there is the notion that gay men cannot be macho's. Being gay equals femininity, it seems.

However, this fabulous queen is now very successful and generates a lot of attention. Attention for Lady Galore is twofold. In the first place, she is selling a concept, namely the brand 'Lady Galore' and therefore needs to be noted. It is her livelihood. If a club hires her to organize or present an event, they do so not just because she is fabulous, but also because she is well known and they hope to make profit of that. At the same time, she says, you need to have a goal with your drag and the attention it generates. For Lady Galore, drag is inextricably connected to LGBT. She tells me it has been a way of generating attention and funds for the LGBT-community for decades. For her, it is very important that the attention that is generated through drag is used for other things than just inflating ones ego. She feels you should use it to do something positive, and that in some way, it is even expected by the LGBT-community:

¹⁹ Lady Galore: Nouja, machomannen willen natuurlijk niet met een man eh... dus ja dan is het wel een scheldwoord.

Sven: Homo is per definitie niet macho. Het is on-macho.

Lady Galore: Wij kunnen geen macho zijn, nee. [lacht]

Say you have like so much followers and likes, why not post an update about Uganda or Russia? Or about safe sex? Or give an interview for er, like I did recently for Hello Gorgeous, stuff like that plays an important role in your drag-career. If you don't deploy yourself for your community, then your community is like, yes girl, you're gorgeous, but that's it... What's your intention, what do you have to offer, what do you have to say? It's not enough to perform a song by Whitney Houston. It takes more.²⁰

Lady Galore does her drag in service of LGBT. It would be short-sighted to say it is merely a job or a source of income. This is someone who uses his attributed femininity to make the world a better place for LGBT's – in fact without a goal, she says, it is not drag at all. Lady Galore tells me drag is about attention, creativity and social relevance. And money, she adds jokingly. Drag is a means of getting attention and it seems that attention can be used differently. For her the social relevance is directly associated with LGBT. Although Lady Galore does think that a straight man could be a drag queen, saying anything is possible, she builds in conditions that would make it nearly impossible for anyone other than a gay man to do drag. She thinks he should have had the same kind of life a gay man would have had. Having had to come out is more or less a requirement, and he should know the ins and outs of gay sex. In her opinion he should have a kind of humour that is focused on the gay scene: he should be gay-minded. What I found most striking however, is that the drag queen-to-be actually should have had the experience of being verbally abused and thus knows how to quickly come up with a witty remark. The archetype of the drag queen I mentioned above wins arguments with words, Galore seems to agree. Sadly, it seems that skill has to be trained through first hand experience. By building in the conditions of what makes a drag queen, Lady Galore seems to appropriate drag for the LGBT-community.

²⁰ weet je, je hebt op een gegeven moment zoveel volgers en likes doe er eens een status uit over eehm Oeganda, of over Rusland, of over eh veilige seks of doe eens een interview voor eh zoals ik nu heb gedaan voor Hello Gorgeous, en dat soort dingen denk ik spelen een belangrijke rol in jouw drag queen-carriere. Als jij je niet inzet voor je community, dan heeft je community ook zoets van, ja meid, je bent een mooie meid maar verder.. wat is je inhoud, wat heb je te bieden, wat ga je melden. Het is niet genoeg om een Whitney Houston liedje te doen. Er komt meer bij kijken.

In General: How Reversing Power Relations Can Be Temporarily Empowering

In presenting four interviews I have done with drag queens, I have demonstrated several ways in which drag may serve as an empowerment strategy. Some aspects of drag were present in all the queens I interviewed. All four seem to be in some way 'affected' by what McNeal describes as the double-bind of gay selfhood. All have experienced the pressure on boys to conform to behaviour appropriate for their sex. Some were bullied for being feminine, or doing things considered feminine, such as dancing or playing with dolls, while others explicitly monitored what they did and said in order not to 'get caught'. Interestingly, all four seem to be able to draw strength from that femininity. Although this is done in different ways, it all starts with attention. Doing drag is for all four a way of drawing attention, in the first place to oneself. Understandably all have said they want to be seen when in drag – as both Miss Phoenix and Lady Galore put it, you do not spend hours doing your make up only to be ignored by the crowd. In that context, drag is a way of taking the femininity you are accused of and in fact is the reason you or your masculinity is considered subordinate and completely turn it around. By enlarging this, which is done by performing femininity (and usually 'better' than a woman could) it becomes a strength and a reason for people to notice you. What you do when you are noticed depends on the queen. In other words, I argue that the reversal from subordinate queer into fabulous queen, both of which are grounded in the same aspect of the self, namely the (attributed) femininity, changes power relations and is empowering in itself. However, there is no doubt that the attention the drag queen gets is positive only in a certain context, like Thomas noted. He thinks going to a soccer match in drag is not advisable since it is a completely different crowd than the one accustomed, or at least open to, drag queens. Moreover, some queens have reported being scorned by their peers. According to Lady Galore, specifically the younger generation of gay boys feels drag damages the reputation of gay men because it strengthens the association between gay and femininity, and Thomas was broken up with when his love interest found out he did drag, with the words: "I want a real man." Thomas goes as far as saying that drags are a marginalized group within a marginalized group, i.e. marginalized within 'gay sub-culture'.²¹ Lady Galore reflects it is not easy to find a partner as a drag queen. This example shows that drag is not an instant solution for fighting accusations of femininity or a way of permanent empowerment, casting aside the

²¹ By no means are gay men or LGBT's a homogenous group or a culture. However, I use 'gay sub-culture' rather to indicate that they are often considered one group, culture or scene by the 'mainstream'.

'subordinate' label and overthrowing patriarchy. In fact, McNeal already noted that the double-bind of gay selfhood might lead to feelings of self-hate. I read this not only as hatred pointed at oneself, but also as hatred coming from gay men, pointed at (certain aspects of) the gay scene or 'gay sub-culture' out of fear for implicit association. In other words, I argue that power relations governing masculinities play a role in the LGBT-community as much as they do in society at large.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this thesis, I asked how drag could serve as an empowerment strategy for gay men. In order to address that question, I worked a definition of drag that was used throughout this thesis. This definition entailed several parts. Firstly, drag performance requires an audience. In the previous chapter, too, we have seen how receiving positive attention is a part of the empowering qualities of drag. Drag is about entertaining an audience, either directly or indirectly, and as such the drag queen relies on her audience. Female impersonation done in the privacy of one's living room is in that regard not considered drag but is by my some of interviewees rather called transvestism and thought to be erotically or emotionally motivated. Secondly, the afore mentioned audience is 'in on the joke', which means that they know they are watching a man performing femininity. Indeed, quite often, although not always, drag performance is an exaggeration of femininity and somewhat of a caricature. Thirdly, the reliance on an audience implies that drag needs to be entertaining in some sense. Like Miss Phoenix noted: you do not spend four hours in make up only to stand in a dark corner. Moreover, since drag is a parody of otherness, meaning it is about men imitating women, drag heavily relies on a binary gender system. This has serious implications for the transgressive, gender-defying and subversive qualities sometimes attributed to drag. In fact, Lorber argues that drag cannot exist in a more gender fluent society and in fact relies on taboos and gender conformity (2004, xvi). Finally, I made a bold statement claiming that drag is inextricably connected with male homosexuality. This can be seen in the history of the gay rights movement which has been connected to drag queens since Stonewall. Moreover, gay men are more likely to be familiar with the afore mentioned gendered taboos and transgressions. In fact, in McNeal's notion of the double bind it is illustrated how gay men are confronted with accusations of femininity regularly. To add to that, Lady Galore may have been on to something when she uncovered a possible origin of the drag queen archetype: constant verbal violation is thought to make some gay men sharp and witty, like the archetype of the drag queen is.

To answer the question how drag can be empowering, I drew on McNeal's article *Behind the Make-Up: Gender and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance* (1999). In it, he claimed that gay men in the United States suffer from a double-bind of gay selfhood: an inner

conflict derived from the cultural demand on boys to behave masculine and an accusation of femininity made against gay men. I have demonstrated how according to Connell gay men have become associated with femininity: patriarchy requires heterosexuality in order to reproduce itself. Heterosexuality rides on the notion that opposites attract. Gay men are attracted to other men and must therefore be somehow feminine. Not only is femininity considered a lesser trait within a patriarchal society, gay men endanger the reproduction of patriarchy. That gay men are not necessarily feminine, does not seem to matter. Although arguably, society prefers its gays masculine, as drag itself is sometimes frowned upon even by gay men. The power relations governing the subordinate position taken up by gay men can be inverted by drag, says McNeal. Drag is a way for gay men of retaliating against a straight hegemony by poking fun of a straight audience and in fact themselves or what society tells them they are. This is done by embracing their (presumed) femininity and enlarging it. By referring to Judith Butler, I have argued that drag queens challenge the notion of a system of gender essentialism: men performing femininity better than women would, upsets the 'balance' of masculinity and femininity, is the claim. Moreover, it implies that femininity and masculinity are not as fixed as we tend to believe. For a system such as patriarchy that for its survival relies on those notions, that can be quite threatening.

Finally, I interviewed four Dutch drag queens in order establish what drag is for them, and how their drag possibly empowers them. I concluded that for all four doing drag indeed had empowering properties and that those are rooted in accusations of femininity. Whether they have experienced those first hand, or they are just sensitive to the prejudice about gay men, the queens I interviewed know they are for one reason of the other considered effeminate or feminine. Moreover, they are aware that femininity is rejected. By embracing this femininity and enlarging it, i.e. by doing drag, they transform it from something suppressing into something empowering. When in drag they get attention, whether for themselves or for their peers, i.e. the LGBT-community. Or they gain the power to control everything about themselves and their audience or a safe 'location' from where they can fight injustice and ignorance.

I have briefly touched upon the restrictions of this technique: it is context and location-bound. Arguably, there are social situations and locations in which drag would be considered inappropriate at best. It is doubtful whether or not drag would be very empowering in such situations. The text by McNeal is based on observations in a drag club, which is obviously a

relatively safe environment for drag queens. The queens I interviewed often have some association with LGBT-events or bars, though be it not exclusively. Yet even in a LGBT-'minded' environment the drag queen's fame is not endless and in fact, many seem to consider the drag queen to be adding to the stigma of femininity of gay men.

Arguably, doing drag is not a cure for compulsory heterosexuality or a stick to beat patriarchy with. But perhaps it can be a stick to poke it with.

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Supplement

Interview topic list

(Introduce myself, explain what I'm doing, etc.)

Tell me about yourself (Who are you, what do you do, etc)

Tell me about your drag.

How did you start? Why?

When are you in drag?

What do you do when you are in drag (performances, setting)?

What is your drag-style/name/persona?

Can you describe the make up process?

What is drag?

Why, if at all, is it different from other forms of cross-dressing?

Can women be drag queens?

How do you feel when in drag?

How is that different from normal life?

What does that difference mean to you?

Thoughts on and experiences with masculinity/femininity.

Does doing drag affect your perception of masculinity (i.e. do you feel more feminine, for example)

How was your childhood?

How do people respond to you doing drag?

What is a real wo/man?

How was your 'coming out' as a gay man?

Any notable experiences regarding homosexuality (abuse, discrimination, etc).

How do you think society regards homosexuality?

Is drag a gay prerogative?

Can heterosexual men do drag?