

Man, Wife, and
Bingo Verifying Diva:
What Drag Bingo Can Do For Me and You

A Senior Distinction Thesis
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Abstract

How is gender ideology reinforced and transformed through the interaction between the family and extra-familial social institutions in Durham, North Carolina and by extension in the contemporary United States? This study is an investigation of the gender boundaries in American culture through the lens of the family and social institutions. I focus on non-heteronormative gender and sexuality, with a special emphasis on gender as a culturally constructed and enacted entity. I describe what is difficult to define categorically by the two-gender system, including those who consider themselves transgender, transvestites, cross-dressers, drag queens, and others that may not even have their own label. I analyze the extent to which the current two-gender social system can accommodate changing concepts of gender in the late-capitalist twenty-first century. The family is a site that can be either culturally preservative or malleable and I assess how family structure is adapting to changing gender systems. Extra-familial social institutions include both mainstream structures like schools and the workplace as well as community organizations that cater to persons of non-normative gender and sexuality. I address these subjects through the study of a Durham-based HIV/AIDS fundraising organization called Drag Bingo, which brings together people of the community of different gender and sexual orientations (including many heterosexual people and their families). Drag Bingo is a paradigmatic site of family and the non-family interaction around issues of non-normative gender. As I see it, I can use Drag Bingo to understand the ways in which the family can be an agent of social change.

Introduction

Out One Night

I wait. The colorful room is filled with the chatter of several hundred people coming in, leisurely filling the seats of long rows of tables, chowing down on veggie burgers and chips, and walking around the open room to look at the sponsors' informational booths. Some people are dancing or singing along to country tunes that roll out from loudspeakers. Volunteers are still passing out last minute fliers for the tables. Performers stand together in a group just outside the double doors where people are entering.

I am seated at one of the long tables near the front of the room where I have a good view of the two stages. The big stage is at the front of the room, auditorium style. The smaller stage has been set up in a wide aisle that bisects the room, making a T with the front stage. My seat faces the small stage, giving me an ideal view. My table is not as full as I had hoped. I wonder if it is because the aisle across from me is so skinny that people are afraid they might get trapped in there. Or perhaps people have just been grabbing the first seats they see when they come in at the back of the room. Some large groups have reserved table sections. Others choose to sit at the round tables on the outskirts of the room.

To my right are two of my roommates who have agreed to accompany me for the evening. One is my best friend, Alison. The other is her boyfriend David, who despite being a first-timer has come in a long, flowing skirt. To my left sits what appears to be a typical, all-American family: father, mother, and daughter who appear to be white, middle-class, and sex-gender normative. As the night wears on, I see or hear nothing to make me doubt these initial assumptions. The man tells me it is his first time at Drag Bingo; he and his wife have come because their teenage daughter has attended in the past. I tell him it is only my second

time and he asks me what to expect. When I tell him what a ball it is going to be he shoots me an 'I'm really skeptical' look.

Finally, it starts. I notice John Paul before most of the talkative audience members. He is on stage trying to get everyone's attention. With an experienced air he manages to get everyone to quiet down and welcomes us. I sit poised. Loud twangy music starts to play and then heads turn to the back of the rooms as two people enter through the double doors. They are wearing heavy make-up, large elaborate wigs, jewelry, and dresses. Most of the costumes match the night's theme, State Fair Bingo, including a hand-sewn dress resembling a box of popcorn. The performers wear clunky heels, sturdy to support some 200 pounds of body weight. They gesture widely as if painting a portrait of elegance, but something is off. I cannot quite pin it down but it peaks out at me from their large hands, slightly hunched shoulders, and plodding stride. Despite their loud display of femininity, something about them is distinctly, well, masculine. I look around to see the faces of the audience and notice that most people are clapping along, grinning widely, laughing, and cheering.

After the song ends, one of the two performers joins John Paul on the stage to host the event. She starts out by introducing herself as Mary K. Mart, and then introducing the rest of the divas. They are Winnie Baygo, Aurora Scott, Anita Strongman, Rodessa Rodehard, Eunice Ray, and a first time diva, Dirty Monet. The next thing Mary does is welcome the audience. "Do we have any straight people in the audience?" she bellows. Cheers erupt from members of the audience and hands shoot into the air. "Lesbians! Are there any lesbians here today?" More applause, hands go up. She proceeds to welcome bisexuals, homosexual men, hermaphrodites, people with swine flu, and drag bingo virgins. Apparently there are no hermaphrodites or people with swine flu, or at least none that admit it. I estimate that there

are about 20 bingo virgins to raise their hands and only notice one person who claims to be bisexual. I also take note that “transgender”, “transsexual”, or “transvestite” are not on this list. This room seems to hold a community that is polarized on the basis of both gender and sexual orientation. Rather than a spectrum of difference, people identify as male or female, gay or straight. There are no middle grounds. There are no outliers of this bi-polar social structure. Or at least Drag Bingo has been set up to maintain that illusion. On one hand, this practice respects those who do not want to be seen as in-betweens, who seek to proudly identify as male or female regardless of their assigned gender at birth. On the other hand, the practice falls in line with other everyday institutions that regulate gender and sexuality.

Next, Mary K. Mart has everyone in the audience stand and raise their bingo markers in the air as we pledge that we are willing to help those living with HIV/AIDS and even



Audience saying the pledge. Courtesy of the Drag Bingo, <http://www.dragbingo.com/>.

though Drag Bingo is JUST a silly game, that we will continue to play until this crisis is over.

We sit. It is time to hear the rules. Mary tells us that every time she calls out B-7, we must stomp our feet anxiously like a seven year

old. When she calls G-54 we must make a disco call that sounds like *Oy! Oy!* When she calls out 0-69 (a discrete reference to the Kama Sutra 69 sex position) we must stand up and wiggle arms flailing in the air and yell *Woooooo!* For this last rule she warns us of the seriousness of this rule, that anyone who sits shyly in his or her seat when 0-69 is called will definitely regret it.

Mary announces the first round of “straight” bingo for “all you straight people in the audience.” We are required to fill our bingo card straight across or diagonal, spelling BINGO. Mary and John Paul call out the numbers slowly, talking and cracking jokes consistently, performing their own stand-up comedy number on top of announcing the Divas.

JP: If you want to do a diet that really works sit in front of a mirror in the nude and eat. Some restaurants might not like it but you could try.

JP: My grandma wouldn't hug me if I didn't have a belt and a t-shirt on.

MK: My mama wouldn't hug me period.

JP: Well have you seen yourself lately?

JP: I hope I do die at drag bingo. I told them to put an offering plate in the casket.

MK: That'd be the day I learn to dance.

JP: If she tries to dance at my funeral, shoot her!

Each round of bingo is interspersed with a performance by one of the BVDs (Bingo Verifying Divas). The divas have each practiced a song, which they lip-sync when it is their turn to perform. They also walk and dance up and down the stage in the center aisle of the room. Some of the Divas are very much men in wigs and dresses, fat-bellied and hairy, carrying themselves like men who slouch and swing their arms rather than appearing femme. At the end of one performance, one of the less-poised Divas dramatically yanks off his wig causing the audience to erupt in cheers. Others clearly pronounce the graceful gesture, expression, and movement that belong to their self-constructed female characters. Their art is an illusion, a masking of one body by creating another more feminine one. Many Divas have

practiced stunning dance numbers that showcase their energy and flexibility, while others aim for a more dramatic, artistic, or even dark impact.

A combination of a drag queen show and a bingo tournament, Drag Bingo is a monthly fundraising event in Durham, North Carolina, that raises money for the Alliance of AIDS Services. United in a cause to help people living with HIV/AIDS and their families, Drag Bingo is meant to create an environment of support and acceptance and that brings people together from both queer and straight communities. But despite the heterosexual mingling, the community is quite homogenized by other criteria. Because Drag Bingo is a charity event, its audience members share an interest in philanthropy, which tends to be a middle-class value. As I got to know more people in the Drag Bingo community, however, I have learned that not everyone is there for the same reasons. For instance, one of the novice performers described his involvement in terms of an opportunity to perform not a commitment driven by the passion for HIV/AIDS fundraising. In fact, he was only able to dress up each month by wearing borrowed dresses and make-up supplied by his family, friends, and the other BVDs. As for the audience members, their continual presence at Drag Bingo each month certainly speaks to their class. When I attended as an audience member in September, the cost of admission was eighteen dollars per person and I spent five dollars on concessions. With a whole family, the price of the evening can quickly become quite expensive. Furthermore, many of the audience members return every single month, repurchasing the experience again and again.

Drag Bingo is both public and private. It is public for obvious reasons: it is downtown, anyone can attend, and it has been advertised in the news and online. It is private, in that it is can be contained from the outside world. It is a community, with its own set of

rules and practices, much like a family that performs certain roles outside of the home but operates differently in its own self-enclosure. Being at Drag Bingo can be like being at home. It is relaxed, casual, and comfortable. Audience members are encouraged to wear whatever they want. A few dress in drag or costumes, but most come in jeans and a tee-shirt. Like a home environment, it is okay to be off-guard, to hoot and holler, and to act differently than you would ordinarily act at work, church, school, or other institutional settings.

After listening to Mary and John Paul's jokes for a while, I began to notice some nuanced undertones to what had at first seemed like random banter. There was a sarcastic irony to their humor that prodded at assumptions of what is normal and what is just not done. "Has anybody ever dated a carny?" Mary asked rhetorically, causing several people around me to softly wonder aloud, "What's a carny?" She had been referring to a person who works at a carnival, sticking with the State Fair theme. People in the audience chuckled lightly or just continued to search for B's, I's, N's, G's, and O's. No one seemed to realize that Mary had just created a new identity category or that she had left it up to us to imagine the set of assumptions that the identity "carny" would entail. I wondered if Mary had ever felt pegged by a label: drag queen.

Mary liked to put a little pressure on her audience. She often addressed people directly, though not abrasively, spotlighting them or calling them up to the front stage to ask them questions. Likewise, her commentary was its own form of pressure. Her jokes targeted issues that everyone could relate to, taking the form of shared self-mockery. Somehow gender and sexuality, while not focal to the dialogue, were constantly under its surface. She was challenging people to think in new ways, to take a look at themselves, and ultimately to laugh at what they see.

Drag Bingo is a place where people can come to bring a little excitement in to their lives. The drag can provoke people's notions of gender, but in small doses each month. The bingo allows people to take a little risk, to feel the thrill of gambling without breaking the law or corrupting their family life. Participants consider Drag Bingo to be a safe and clean environment, a nurturing venue for family and friends. And not to mention, the proceeds saves lives – what a great cause! The embrace of Drag Bingo within a family-values system reflects an increasing acceptance of homosexuality as well as support for people living with HIV or AIDS in today's cultural environment. Considering that the burden of HIV/AIDS falls most heavily on Durham's black population and the audience of Drag Bingo is mostly white, the charity effort could be seen as patronizing.¹ However, I see this effort as a form of safety in validating people's view of themselves as socially conscious. Drag Bingo shows how the gay and drag social scenes are being pulled up from underground – in bars and nightclubs—and made public and legitimate, a change from previous decades. The main social outlets to be openly gay or to experience drag were concentrated in places that were seen as unsafe, dirty, and sexually promiscuous. But Drag Bingo is a place to experience drag in a legitimized and safe setting. As an environment where you can bring your kids or your grandma, it is inviting to people who may have never seen a drag show before but want to. Drag Bingo is also a place where people can seek acceptance within a like-minded community, because at Drag Bingo it is okay to be normative. While celebrating gender and sexual difference, Drag Bingo is not exclusive or counter-heterosexual. I think it is a place where straight people go in order to find something a little out of their ordinary, but not too much so. I believe that going to Drag Bingo makes them feel more informed, progressive,

¹ Downey-Piper, Mel. 2008. *State of durham county's health report 2008*. Durham, NC: Partnership for a Health Durham, 5.

politically correct, and sensitive to their contemporary social reality. I also think that Drag Bingo can be a way for gay people to support these efforts of straight people to branch out from their everyday norms.

Ultimately, Drag Bingo is slightly kinky but safe. It is simultaneously a means of seeking acceptance and unity while appreciating difference. Such intersecting motivations draw people to Drag Bingo month after month. While Drag Bingo appeals to a sense of excitement, nothing is really out of the ordinary there. Drag Bingo construes itself as outrageous, but despite the fact that men can walk around freely in dresses, what is so strange about Drag Bingo? Really it is more like a picture of normalcy, with a slight edginess. It's just a little different, a little testing, a little out of the ordinary, a little kinky. People can step just slightly outside of their comfort zones, without straying so far that they are in danger of losing their way back. But that is only because of the one simple fact that men are in dresses and perform and interact as women. Otherwise it all feels pretty normal. But what is normal anyway?

Project Intent

I have chosen to study Drag Bingo as a way to highlight the way gender is changing in the United States. I am specifically studying the interaction between the family and extra-familial social institutions around the subject of non-normative gender in Durham, North Carolina. The family is important because that is the primary center of socialization in child rearing. Families also articulate the public and private divide that structures the various layers of the self. The distinct roles individuals fill in the home, within the extended family, and within social institutions make the family a pivotal site for the study of gender and sexual

identity construction. Sometimes, the privacy of the home can offer a place to be yourself, to do or be things that are not accepted publicly, like talking with a mouth full of food or running around the house naked. On the other hand, the family is a site of discipline, particularly through intergenerational relations. Within the childrearing process, discipline is most intense, not necessarily through instruction and punishment, but through censorship. Michel Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, that the is a lack of open discussion between parents and children about sex, is its own form of discussion which teaches social rules and knowledge.² What many people see as a sexual silence derives from social fear and self-regulation in the effort to fit into what is perceived as normal. This silence carries over to adulthood. I am almost twenty-two years old and I cannot even come out to my parents as sexual at all, or to my younger sister for that matter. Despite the fact that I consider them loving and accepting, I can never escape the gaze of their judgment. I am incapable of talking to them about kissing, so I can hardly imagine the struggle I would face were I to come out as LGBT. Every family experiences different levels of social freedom and discipline, but discipline is certainly a crucial component of the formula.

Through my discussion of the family, I try to mediate the roles between the individual and larger society in order to understand how these identities form, how they are maintained, and how they adapt to new political contexts. Drag Bingo is a site where the family inhabits a non-family social institution, positioning people both as family members and independent members of society. This intersection is not unique; church would be another example of such an intersection. The difference with drag bingo is that non-normativity is not only present and integrated into the social scheme, but it is a primary focus.

² Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *The history of sexuality*. Histoire de la sexualité. english. New York : Vintage Books, 1980- , c1978-, 27.

This study is an investigation of gender relations in American culture through the lens of the family and social institutions. By non-normative gender, I am describing what is hard to define categorically by our two-gender system, namely those who consider themselves transgender, transvestites, cross-dresser, drag queens, and others that may not even have their own label. I am looking at gender that transgresses the traditional binary model of male or female. I distinguish non-normative gender from the gender queer, so as to account for populations who may be somewhere outside the boxes of male and female, but yet still want to be connected to the materiality of American gender structures.

The family is a site that can be either culturally preservative or malleable and I intend to assess how family structure is adapting to changing gender systems. The extra-familial social institutions can be mainstream or community-based, but they are interesting because they affect everyone. Mainstream institutional structures like schools and the workplace regulate the way gender can be explored and expressed. Community organizations like Drag Bingo that cater to both normative and non-normative gender tend to be more celebratory of gender and its possibilities.

Through this context, I intend to analyze the ways in which the two-gender system is changing in this time of late stage capitalism in the US. The structure of gender and sexuality are always changing, but I intend to gauge how substantially it is changing and the implications of these changes in contemporary American culture. Is gender blending becoming more mainstream? Is the socio-cultural environment allowing for gender blending to be made more visible? Is gender transforming with bounding leaps or crawling incessantly? How does the changing construction of gender impact our concepts of the self in society? I raise these questions because the regulation of gender and sexuality do more than

simply maintain the status quo; they are harmful and limiting to everyone. Understanding gender and sexuality in new ways makes us self-aware of the cultural forces driving our thoughts and actions. If we can denaturalize our own social vectors, we can be a more innovative, sensitive, and inclusive society.

In sum, I am looking at Drag Bingo in order to understand the interplay between familial and extra-familial social regulation with the context of the United States' changing times. This relationship will illuminate any potential release from the twentieth century regulatory regimes by showing the new possibilities available for expressing gender and sexuality. These new developments are highly contingent upon integrating changing ideologies into family discourse. I analyze the work that Drag Bingo does by integrating families and non-normative gender to show that the family can become an agent of social change.

Methodologies

The research project in which I have invested months of my life, I came to on a whim. When I was invited into the thesis program, I had not thought nor heard anything about it. I was told I had a few weeks to submit a proposal should I chose to write. So I talked out themes and interests with my friends and kept returning to the possibility of studying gender (and transgender) in contemporary American society and in Durham. What I still needed was a site, some specific group or subculture. It was my roommate who first mentioned Drag Bingo. She had heard of it and had always wanted to see what it was all about. A quick Google search brought me to the website for Durham's Drag Bingo and after reading the descriptions and looking at the pictures, I knew that it was perfect.

Initially, Drag Bingo was a name to me. I had little to start with besides my knowledge of American gender norms and a strong interest to learn Drag Bingo and non-normative gender. I was also a novice to the theoretical discussions I would soon immerse myself in. However counter-intuitive, I consider my lack of initial knowledge a strength that aided my ability to observe detail that I may have missed if I already knew exactly what I was looking for. Of course I had expectations before setting foot inside the Durham Armory, but these expectations were incomplete, the details trapped in my memory. For instance, I had watched the television series *Noah's Arc*, a drama about four gay men and their romantic and sexual lives in which one of the characters decided spontaneously to perform in a drag show one day. He had said something along the lines of *There's nothing that I hate more than bad drag. If you're going to do drag, do it well.* I remember that the four characters (gay males) performed in drag, creating such an amazing illusion of being women. I was also familiar with the movie *Kinky Boots*, which tells the story of a drag queen named Lola who helps Charlie the shoemaker save his father's factory with a line of sexy transvestite high-heeled boots. Lola is anatomically male but since childhood has loved to dress in heels and dresses. (S)he performs as a drag queen but also sometimes dresses as a man, though (s)he feels happier and more comfortable dressed as a female. I had also seen movies and television specials about transgender individuals, for which the common scenario is that of a man trapped in a woman's body or vice versa.

These representations of drag gave me a skewed notion of drag and what I would find at Drag Bingo. They gave me the idea that being a drag queen was always about passing as female and that it was about wanting to be a woman and embody femininity. When I came to

Drag Bingo, I saw many performers that clearly did not remotely pass as female. But was it that they were just bad at drag, or perhaps something more?

Media representations of transgender and drag informed me in ways that caused me to initially conflate the practices. Yet my confusion had a positive effect on my research because it made me articulate the distinctions and connections between the two. As a result I can more clearly see that the roles of drag and transgender in American society are both separate and similar; they mean completely different things for the individual but they are so highly interconnected. My initial confusion has helped me to understand the intricate relationship between transgender and drag and the dialectic of the external and internal, or the social and introspective components of gender. Had I gone into this project with a clearer idea of drag and transgender, I suspect that I would have kept them as separate terms and been unable to see the connections and incorporate the ideas of both into my argument.

I was curious. I wanted to understand why some people want to dress in opposite gender clothing and how they understand themselves as part of a two-gender society. As more and more questions budded, I was able to challenge my own culturally embedded concepts of gender and sexual identity in a way that has fueled and shaped the essence of my project.

When I began the initial research phase of this project, I expected to undergo a linear and even data collection process. Ideally every month I would attend drag bingo as a volunteer or as an audience member. I would make contacts each time with participants, volunteers, and audience members as well as contacts in social institutions in Durham not directly connected to Drag Bingo. I expected to find an equal number of performers, volunteers, audience members, and non-bingo social institution representatives to agree to

interview with me and I expected to conduct these interviews periodically and evenly spaced during my fall semester. But those expectations did not match the reality of anthropological fieldwork. I did attend Drag Bingo each month, once as an audience member and three times as a volunteer, just as planned which kept my participant observation routine. The interviewing process however was not the straight path I had hoped for. Sometimes there would be periods when it was difficult to schedule anything at all or even get in touch with people then suddenly these periods would be punctuated by frenzied weeks with several interviews in a few days. Of course, most of the work accumulated towards the end of the semester.

More significantly, as I worked I discovered I could not just group people into categories like “audience person” and “performer” and collect information that represented these separate camps because I found that a diverse group of people populates the Drag Bingo community and that there were a great number of ideas to be explored from everyone. Especially with the performers, I found a lot of ideas about drag and why it was important to them. In the end, I did reach ten formal interviews, a good number for a study of this size and scope. I interviewed four quite different performers, one audience member, the Drag Bingo Volunteer Coordinator, an openly gay employee of the Alliance of AIDS services, a staff member of Duke University’s LGBT Center, an administrator at a magnet boarding high school in Durham, and an academic who has written about queer theory, performance theory, and the experience of black, trans subjectivity in the South. I came to these different informants meandering through the research experience, honing and expanding my questions as I did more and more interviews. I spoke informally with other audience members, volunteers, and performers while at Drag Bingo and as a volunteer I became friends with the

youngest performer at Drag Bingo, who is my age, and his supportive mother. There were plenty of people who I wanted to interview from whom I simply was unable to get attention or time.

In addition, I had proposed that I would conduct two interviews with each person (30-45 minutes then 60-90 minutes), but thanks to the willingness of the participants I met, I ended up only conducting one with each for much longer and more in-depth. In the fall, I was taking two classes which significantly informed my knowledge of relevant theory. The first class was my advisor Anne Allison's course *Sex and Money*, for which I did a great deal of work exploring the transacting, fetishistic, and liberating aspects of sexuality within capitalism. The second class was Sharon Holland's *Race and Sexuality*. For this course, I read and discussed texts that related to gender and sexual identity, control, and regulation; to the interrelationship of biology, history, and culture; and to the inescapable overlap of racial and sexual subjectivity. These theories have highly guided my own methodological research.

Lastly, as I have begun to construct my arguments I have been surprised by the great deal of previous personal experiences that I can use to the benefit of this paper. I have used personal experiences to add allegory and evidence to what I have learned from my interviews and participant observation. Through these memories I have been able to develop a writing style that is personable, unlike the rigid academic style that I have always used in the past. Over-commitment to personal cultural beliefs and practices can sometimes prevent an anthropologist from seeing past her own cultural logic. But I am in fact a member of American contemporary society and I do have knowledge that I can use. Simultaneously, I am still newly aware of the gender processes going on around me. Through that newness I am somehow able to observe my own culture through a new lens, as if stepping outside of

my culture and taking another look at it. While I must strive to keep my own culture's belief and value systems from blocking the way I see, I can also tap into that knowledge when it can help me. As so eloquently put by Zora Neale Hurston, my culture "was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see for wearing it."³ As I have worked on this project, I have slowly begun to see that chemise, and what a prize that discovery has been!

Chapter Outline

A large part of my work is to articulate identity formation through the relationship between the individual and society. My study thus occupies a multidimensional space that superimposes theoretical and local territory. I consider my "field site" not as a distinct circumscribable space, but one that has many layers of breadth. In my writing, I constantly move between these various layers, zooming in and out of microscopic and macroscopic levels.

I have broken my discussion into four chapters that approach these various layers, followed by a conclusion, which synthesizes the chapters. Chapter 1 provides three levels of background discussion that reflect a zooming out setup.

I. The first section is about the specific history of Drag Bingo and how it was started in Durham. Here I run through the logistical details of how Durham's Drag Bingo operates and why it is so successful in this particular city within the Triangle.

II. The next section take a step back to look at the context of the city of Durham and the surrounding area, taking into account its history, demographics, and its relationship with

³ Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and men*New York, N.Y. : Perennial Library, c1990, 1.

Duke University. The discussion of Duke and Durham is place to examine the tensions of race and class in light of the demographics of people brought to Durham seeking higher education, research opportunities, and academic employment. I also discuss the relationship as a dichotomy of fear and protection between university and community, which has a central role in the discussion of non-normative gender and sexuality. Expanding on the idea of fear, I introduce one of the central themes of this thesis: the idea of visibility. I discuss visibility in the context of describing the LGBT scene of Durham. Ultimately, I say that from a distance, Durham has a less noticeably visible LGBT community than the nearby cities of Chapel Hill and Raleigh. However, Durham's LGBT community is not absent either, it simply requires a closer look. While many people are ostracized through a suppression of visibility, the LGBT is more intricately connected to community at large, spreading out to reach all of the resources of the Triangle region. This integration can in many ways be an asset to LGBT-identified persons.

III. Third, I take another step back to look at American society in general. I navigate the history of the politics surrounding sexuality and gender through the twentieth century, emphasizing the culture of repression, negativity, and fear. I discuss the way these influences become a platform for restrictive identity categories.

Chapter 2 is a highly theoretical chapter in which I begin my discussion but unpacking the concepts of gender, drag, and identity. In order to understand the way gender is changing, it is important to be able to understand the complexities of what exactly gender is and how it work in my society and on me. I address the many levels in which gender is construed as part of the body (anatomical machinery), inside the body and psyche (impulses and desires), outside the body (expression and performance), and within a social

consciousness. I attempt to connect these dimensions of gender to clarify the determinants of gender identity construction.

In Chapter 3, I dive back into the scene of Durham looking specifically at the community of Drag Bingo. I explain the work that Drag Bingo does both during the temporary moment of the event and through what audience members take away from the experience. I argue that people are drawn to Drag Bingo because the experience offers them a way to safely and comfortably push back at the regulatory regimes that govern their daily actions and self-schemas. Drag Bingo is also an outlet for social fantasy, but this fantasy is regulated through routine performance. In the same way, Drag Bingo meshes unusual and familiar representations of gender, which introduces new ideas about gender into families.

In chapter 4 I expand my scope again and look at the context of American culture in late stage capitalism. Here is I answer my question: how is gender changing in American society at large? This chapter seeks to make sense of why an institution like Drag Bingo can be so successful today in the context of massive consumerism.

Review of Literature

I seek to investigate these questions in order to understand contemporary sexuality and gender constructions in the United States. Sexuality and gender can be understood through a dissection of the categorization of identity. In society, gender and sexuality change relative to political power structures. Sexual identity categorization is not a universal principle. David Halperin's study of sexuality in ancient Athens shows that sexuality at that time and place was not seen as a fixed identity tied to sex acts, like "gay" and "straight," but

instead it was related to one's position within the social hierarchy.⁴ However in the past several centuries, sexuality has a distinct ancestral place in history. As sexuality takes on clear roles it gets inscribed within regulatory regimes that reinforces these distinctive roles. I establish that within these regimes, sexuality is not a site of freedom. To argue this position, I draw upon Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* as well as several post-Foucauldian thinkers who expand his concepts within sexuality and gender studies. The main idea of these works is that the individual coheres through the policing of the body within a social discourse between the self and the structures of society. In conjunction with this idea of regulation, I discuss theories about drag and the everyday performance of gender. Gender regulation is highly limiting as to what kind of behavior and self-expression is possible. Enmeshed in these regulatory regimes, we find a great deal of sexual repression, fear, and control. Within these conversations about regulatory regimes, gender takes on both tangible and intangible meaning, simultaneously defining itself visually through outward performance and intrinsically as an attribute of the soul.

I argue that these social discourses for gender and sexuality are created in a way that they do work on society. Drawing from Ann Stoler, I describe the way regulation of gender and sexuality during twentieth century Euro-American Imperialism were essential to the design of maintaining a divide between the colonizer and the colonized.⁵ I also use literature by Saidiya Hartman to discuss the way gender and sexuality in the Antebellum South had a specific role in law as a way to maintain the slave trade.⁶ The work of these different sexual and gender formations varies depending on social structure, which is configured differently

⁴ Halperin, David M. Is there a history of sexuality? *History and Theory* 28, (3) (October 1989): 257.

⁵ Stoler, Ann. Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th-century colonial cultures. *American Ethnologist* 16, (4) (Nov., 1989): 634.

⁶ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of subjection : Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century america* New York : Oxford University Press, 1997.

in space and time. In these configurations, the individual does not generate gender from within the self; his or her gender is shaped by surrounding political identity categories.

Extending this understanding of regulation into a contemporary view, I lay out the new sexual and gender roles within late-stage capitalism. For this notion, I outline Karl Marx's concept of the commodity and the conditions of early bourgeois capitalism in order to describe the way gender has been commodified. I also draw extensively from Donald Lowe's book *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA*, which engages with the Foucauldian notion of regulatory discourse, but asserts that this regulation begins to dissolve within late-stage capitalism through a proliferation of commodities. Commodities, he argues, enable many new possibilities for expressing gender and sexuality, which pushes the US toward a lifestyle rather than identity based concept of sexuality.⁷ The commodification of gender is palpable at Drag Bingo where money is transacted to obtain a novel kind of gender experience and costume is invested with the mystical power of self-transformation. Drag Bingo is thus a site to understand the available categories, social structures, and individual desires of the particular space in Durham, North Carolina at a particular historical moment.

Situational Context: The Bull City to City of Medicine

This study takes place in Durham, North Carolina, a site where progress and tradition intermingle. Located in the South, Durham is situated in an oddly metropolitan area amongst the state's many small suburban towns and rural areas. Southern ideologies root Durham to its historical soil. On Saturday morning, Durhamites can be found shopping at the downtown Farmer's market to support their neighborhood agriculture. On Sunday afternoon, they sit leisurely and drinking sweet tea outside of Foster's, a local country store and restaurant

⁷ Lowe, Donald M. *The body in late-capitalist USA* Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 1995.

where you can get a real home-cooked Southern meal. The South has a reputation for being slower, rural and conservative. The practice of slavery in the South left a stronger legacy of white-upper class supremacy and racial tension between blacks and whites. These tensions generate an economic disparity as well, with poverty falling more heavily on blacks. As economy is always a reflection of social structure, this disparity is stronger in places of pre-existing racial tension, where ideology effects whose labor is cheap. Racially, Durham is an interesting city because the sizes of the black and white populations are roughly equivalent. According to the 2000 census ten years ago, whites and blacks together composed about eighty-four percent of the population with thirteen percent Hispanic and five percent Asian or other.⁸ Searching the Internet, I have found an array of different demographic reports about Durham, yet I cannot locate the income distribution by race. I find this worth noting because I did find several different sources that report on the racial distribution and the income distribute but they do not show the connection between these factors. Despite the impersonal and anonymous tone of a census report, I believe this absence of statistical information on the racial distribution of wealth and poverty reflects the sensitivity of that topic. So despite having a balance of white and blacks

Despite its traditional foundations, Durham is in many ways urban, innovative, and bustling. At the crossroads of multiple highways, Durham experiences a lot of movement as ideas, people, and goods traffic the area. Visitors from other areas frequent the city, each year spending increasingly more on leisure than on business as Durham calculatedly develops itself into a center for arts and entertainment.⁹

⁸ Dempsey, Spencer. 2008. *Durham & durham county, north carolina 2008* Durham, NC: Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce.

⁹ Durham Visitor Spending: 1997 – 2007, Source: Durham Convention & Visitors Bureau, <http://www.dcvb-nc.com/comm/SODE2008/Pages/visitorimpact.html>

With a population of 262,715 Durham is not a large city.¹⁰ However, US census and NC State demographic data suggest that Durham is a rapidly growing city. Projections estimate that by 2030, Durham's population will have exceeded 400,000.¹¹ These trends are due primarily to the growing number of job and residence opportunities available in the downtown area of Durham city as well as efforts to transform Durham into a cultural niche.

In the *State of Durham's Economy 2008*, Durham portrays itself as energetic and blossoming despite the vast losses felt by the nation after the economic crash of 2008. Indeed, Durham has survived the crash with only 33 business closings in 2008 and 23 closings in 2007 compared with 41 business closings before the crash in 2006. Despite an economic slowdown, manufacturing alone brought in over 1 trillion 7 million dollars in 2008.¹² With growth in investments, population, and jobs, with “relatively low” unemployment rates below state and national averages, with a “stable” tax base, and with a young and diverse community, Durham makes an excellent case for itself as a burgeoning twenty-first century city.¹³

Durham is a place of both industry and research. Durham is a city that was built upon dual industries of tobacco and textile manufacturing. Today manufacturing is still the primary source of jobs and revenue for the city, though ties to agriculture and tobacco have tapered. Research and technology have filled that gap. Durham is part of the *Research Triangle*, an area that unites Durham and its nearby cities Raleigh and Chapel Hill in research and technological development. The three cities each contain a major university, NC State University at Raleigh, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Duke University

¹⁰ (<http://www.durham-nc.com/about/>)

¹¹ Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, N.C. State Demographics, *Durham City-County Planning, Durham County* by Jean Bradley Anderson (2009) (<http://www.durham-nc.com/about/>)

¹² <http://www.dcvb-nc.com/comm/SODE2008/Pages/employment.html>

¹³ <http://www.dcvb-nc.com/comm/SODE2008/Pages/stateofeconomy.html>

in Durham, causing the area to a national hub for post-doctorate research. The Research Triangle Park was developed as place where professional with backgrounds in higher education can join together to create new technologies that would in turn encourage industrial growth.

Durham is an interesting location to study the modification and conservation of gender ideals in America because of its mixture of influences. It is an urban and economic center full of activity, culture, and expansion, yet it is immersed in a Southern culture with a high influence of conservative and family values. It is as the cutting edge of science and medicine but only twenty minutes from cow pastures. Durham is fairly stable economically and the cost of living is low yet the city is still dealing with poverty and urban development issues. Durham County is one of the more liberal, or blue, counties in the mosaic of red and blue that decorates North Carolina. The state has been predominantly republican for a long time prior to the 2008 presidential election when the state voted blue.¹⁴ As of November 8, 2009, North Carolina has 2,763,623 registered democrats to only 1,930,484 registered republicans, with 6,080 Libertarians and 1,375,835 unaffiliated citizens.¹⁵ This change points to the disastrous national economy and the accompanying demand for progress, or at least an exchange of political power.

The intersection of change and conservation is the perfect milieu for my study of gender. Drag Bingo represents a specific community in the city of Durham, North Carolina, but this community is able to elucidate a great deal about gender in America. Drag Bingo brings radical and conservative notions of gender into one room. The family, no matter its

¹⁴ Election center 2008 - election results & politics news from CCN.com. in CNN [database online]. [cited November 2009 Available from <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>.

¹⁵ North carolina state board of elections. Raleigh, North Carolina, November 2009]. Available from <http://www.sboe.state.nc.us/>.

form, is an instrument that can preserve notions of gender between generations as children absorb gender and sexual logic first and foremost at home. At Drag Bingo the family comes head to head with blatant inversions (or queering) of normalized gender logic. Drag Bingo is where the family and the queer overlap and engage in conversation both becoming open and acknowledging the other. It seems a highly productive atmosphere for addressing issues of contemporary gender, yet it is also a place to examine the everyday. Like the city of Durham, Drag Bingo itself is a place of both forward thinking and custom. In this way, Drag Bingo becomes the perfect cross section for analyzing changing gender in mainstream America.

Chapter 1

Piecing It Together

I. Drag Bingo Sweeps the Nation

Drag Bingo is not a practice unique to Durham, North Carolina. The idea to combine the game bingo with drag shows originated in Seattle Washington in the early 1990s, when a fundraising and support organization for HIV/AIDS victims needed a creative new activity that would sustainably boost donations. Judy Werle, the leader of the Chicken Soup Brigade, faced the challenge of coming up with the perfect new fundraising event for her organization. She decided to look to where people were spending money freely with the logic that that spending could be redirected to a better cause.¹⁶ Bingo halls stood out with their addictive appeal to gamblers. Bingo can be a particularly addictive form of gambling because even though only one person in a hall of five hundred people will spell bingo first, all of the non-winners get increasingly invested in each round as they watch their cards fill. Each time they lose, they walk away frustrated, feeling that they were just on the brink of winning. For her research, Werle visited Seattle's bingo halls, but found that one after the other was dull, smoky, and uptight. Die-hard players shushed any chatting while the caller monotonously read numbers until someone called out bingo. Every bingo hall was just the same, lifeless.¹⁷ Werle needed a way to spice things up, to create a fun environment that would bring in a larger pool of people and keep them returning over and over again.

The answer was drag. When Werle put together the first trial fundraiser of what she originally called "Gay Bingo", the event was packed and her ten-dollar tickets continued to

¹⁶ Kiviat, Barbara. How drag queens took over bingo. *TIME Magazine*. May 2, 2007.

¹⁷It's fun, it's a hit, it's gay bingo. *The Register-Guard*, June 2, 1996, , sec 10C.

sell out ever since that first session.¹⁸ People flocked over and over simply to see a drag performance and play bingo. Werle had created a new niche in the community. At first the crowd was a primarily gay group but soon it attracted a straight crowd as well. According to Glenn Holsten who directed a documentary about Gay Bingo, the event brought together a broad spectrum of people -- “gay, straight, old, young, black, white, single, taken.” As I have never been to Seattle’s Gay Bingo, I cannot describe the community there. Having been to Durham’s Drag Bingo, I question the degree to which Holsten really saw people from “*all walks of life.*”¹⁹ Instead I imagine that Gay Bingo allured a fairly specific group of people with common ideologies about the merits of that experience.

The news of the Gay Bingo’s success spread quickly and other cities began to create their own versions of Werle’s Gay Bingo fundraiser. Mostly HIV/AIDS relief organizations adopted the event, but other charity organizations did as well, like the Rocky Mountain Multiple Sclerosis Center.²⁰ Today, some variation of Drag Bingo is becoming a must-have for cities that want to offer many cultural opportunities. Werle has inadvertently created a national movement! The events’ success reflects a contemporary demand for LGBT cultural activities in a good, safe family-oriented environment. It shows that there is a desire to incorporate a gay lifestyle into a traditional family-values system, as well as a desire from hetero-normative families to be a part of gay culture.

Werle called her event Gay Bingo, though many cities have adopted the term Drag Bingo for their own events. In calling her event Gay Bingo, Werle played up the media’s sensationalization of homosexuality and “gay culture” as flamboyant, comical, and out there. She was quoted in *Time Magazine* as saying, “we decided to liven it up in the way that only

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kiviat.

²⁰ Ibid.

gay men can.” This portrayal of homosexuality as exotic, flamboyant, and sensational would have more accurately characterized drag. Werle is reproducing stereotypes of homosexuality that actually have little to do with sexual orientation. Drag Bingo is a more appropriate name and it is also a more inclusive name that is marketable to a crowd that does not identify as gay or with the gay community. Besides denotative accuracy the use of the term drag, also helps to detach AIDS from the gay community. According to Jan Muller, an accounting assistant for the Alliance of AIDS Services Carolina, avid Drag Bingo participant, and LGBTQ activist, Drag Bingo’s appeal to families is not only a way to generate the most local support, but it is in part a way to detach AIDS from the gay community and redistribute the responsibility for caring for those with HIV and AIDS. Having a successful fundraiser for the Alliance each month that is well attended by hetero-normative families makes alleviating the AIDS pandemic a shared responsibility that everyone should care about. Jan told me that during the 1990’s, AIDS was becoming a more universal disease in the US, but that a new wave of infections in the gay population in the 2000’s undid some of the previous decade’s de-stigmatization.²¹ The epidemiology of AIDS is highly complex and constantly fluctuating. Despite the fact that science has revealed so much about the virus HIV in the past few decades, it is still incurable and intensely scary. Certainly, there has vast education about the disease and most people no longer consider it a gay disease. However, fluctuating statistics, like Jan mentioned, tend to cause a great deal of panic that has negative consequences on society’s scapegoat populations, including the gay population. Even today, the American Red Cross will not accept blood donations from “a male who has had sexual contact with another

²¹ Jan Muller, formal interview, October 20, 2009.

male *even once* since 1977” and everyone who donates blood must read that statement.²² Backed by the white lab coat of science, even this short phrase can significantly alter blood donors’ perceptions of gay males and cause subconscious prejudices against them. For Jan, the effort to detach HIV/AIDS from homosexuality is a high priority that can help improve gay rights and acceptance. So bringing together a sexually mixed audience, and further an audience who is mainly white and middle-class, helps distribute this responsibility.

Durham’s Drag Bingo began in mid-2001, when John Paul Womble and a committee with the Alliance of AIDS Services Carolina decided to try it as a new fundraiser. Drag Bingo is one of four major fundraising events that sustain the Alliance. The AIDS Walk & Ride is a large annual fundraiser for which fundraising teams sign up and participate in a walk or bike ride in downtown Raleigh. The aim is



Alliance of AIDS Services Carolina
<http://www.aas-c.org/aasc/organization.html>

to raise a large amount of money at once and create a feeling of solidarity as community members march in unison in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Works of Heart Art Auction is another annual event catered to a “specific demographic of large spenders” who can “drop \$1000 on a painting.” The atmosphere at this auction is “prestigious” and “refined.” The last fundraiser is a joint fundraiser both for the Alliance and the Durham-based AIDS Community Residence Association (ACRA), which provides community housing for HIV-positive individuals and their families along with 24-hour care. The event is called Evening with Friends, for which people from the Triangle region host their own dinner or cocktail

²² Eligibility criteria by alphabetical listing in American Red Cross [database online]. 2009 [cited March 29, 2010 Available from <http://www.redcrossblood.org/donating-blood>.

parties, asking their guests to make a donations. There is also a large get together celebration for everyone who has attended an Evening with Friends Party.²³

Logistically, Drag Bingo runs differently from these other main Alliance fundraisers because it is a monthly event and smaller community of highly committed people. Drag Bingo is based off of ongoing participation and requires constant behind the scenes preparation. Melissa, the volunteer coordinator, oversees the volunteers required for each Bingo event to run smoothly, needing at least forty people. Her job also requires her to assemble the nuts and bolts of Drag Bingo during the rest of the month between Bingos. She coordinates with the city of Durham to rent out the Armory space, manages pre-existing sponsorships and donated concessions, and seeks out new people who want to get involved in the battle against HIV/AIDS, have the resources to help, and want to be associated with Drag Bingo. Everything except the space is donated so that one hundred percent of the money that is raised can directly support the people living with HIV and AIDS. The Alliance's client services provide emergency funding necessary for housing, food, medicine, electricity, dental care, eye care, an on-staff dietician, psychological counseling and treatment adherence counseling. There is also an education and awareness sector that funds a "Preventions for Positives" counseling program along with free, anonymous testing in the community.²⁴ According to Melissa, as of November 2009, Drag Bingo had raised over half a million dollars for these services, though the need remains pressing as ever.²⁵

Drag Bingo is different than the other Alliance fundraisers because rather than a large public gathering, Drag Bingo is a smaller network of highly committed individuals. The

²³ Melissa Cartwright-Dressler, formal interview, November 19, 2009. & Alliance of AIDS services carolina organizational information. [cited March 29, 2010 Available from <http://www.aas-c.org/aasc/organization.html>.

²⁴ Melissa Cartwright-Dressler, formal interview, November 19, 2009.

²⁵ Ibid.

atmosphere is homey and intimate, Mary K. Mart and the other Bingo Verifying Divas interacting directly with the audience. The BVDs and other coordinators function like a family, as Melissa described to me in an interview. There is a “core group” of performers and others who float in once in awhile. Mary K. Mart and Rodessa Rhodehard, also known as Randy and Rodney, act as the mom and dad to all the other bingo divas. They decide the themes and help with costumes and make-up and take newer divas under their wings. Everyone from the “core group” is extremely committed to Drag Bingo. They all buy or sew their own costumes. As Melissa said, “They just give, give, give! And they’ve been doing it for eight years and they haven’t asked for a thing.”²⁶ One BVD called Sierra Leone comes to Drag Bingo all the way from Washington D.C. every month. Despite its smaller size, Drag Bingo is successful because of the high degree of committed volunteerism and participation it has behind it. Melissa described the way she sometimes felt that the BVDs financial commitment to Drag Bingo topped that of actual Alliance employees like herself. “We’ll all take pay cuts... Most of us are the primary supporters in our families. I’m not but I was for six years and there’s a lot of sacrifices. But then, the girls put in 100 bucks for a dress.”²⁷

While mutually committed, I have been told multiple times that the BVDs all have their own reasons for being involved. Yet in all of them, I see a shared passion. They talk about how Drag Bingo is an outlet for giving back and that some of them have been personally affected by HIV/AIDS. However, when you go to Drag Bingo, you can see how truly involved and excited they are on a creative level, with their wild themed costumes, music, and dance numbers. Being a BVD demands a great deal of time, effort, and money

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

that only their creative pleasure can sustain. They all give off a sparkle of inspiration in their performances beyond the level of the funds they are raising.

Drag Bingo is a dedicated community centered around fundraising for a cause that has affected many of the coordinators and audience members. It is first and foremost a fundraiser, but I believe that its regular success has to do with something else. “It’s interesting to see the difference [that] we offer... it’s popping up more and more. People want to see a drag show,” Melissa said. She mentioned that there was a whole controversial history of drag in Raleigh. “In the mid-90s there was a big hoopla with the city council and drag being performed at the Capital Coral. It was equated to strip shows. They made a big deal about it in the paper... [Drag] is just now breaking that barrier – that stereotype – and it’s no longer a moral dilemma.” This breaking “barrier” speaks to the changing times; normative society is becoming interested in seeing gender bended.

Brian Denton filled me in on more of Drag Bingo’s history. Brian has been involved with Drag Bingo since the end of 2003, about two years after the event was kick-started. At the time, Drag Bingo was held at the Eno River Unitarian Church on Garrett Road near Chapel Hill, but it had outgrown the small church and was preparing to relocate to downtown Durham. As a gambling event, the moving process was tricky because the coordinators had to reapply for a Bingo license, which is tied to a location. They opted to keep Drag Bingo alcohol free, encouraging a positive, family image and representing the Alliance as a respectable organization.

Drag Bingo has been much more successful in Durham than it was at the Eno near Chapel Hill. Even during renovations of the Amory, Drag Bingo failed to accumulate a large crowd when it was held temporarily in Raleigh. Brian said that the Armory was an ideal

space for Drag Bingo and a vast improvement over the Eno, which “felt like someone’s backyard party.” The Armory on the other hand is impressive. “Now you’re walking into something the size of a basketball floor, with a real sound system. That legitimized it. It seems like a bigger deal. People understand that there’s a purpose and that purpose is to raise money.” But besides the physical space of the Armory, Melissa felt that the population of people in Durham might have something to do with its greater success there. She suggested that maybe Durham has been harder hit by HIV/AIDS or that the community is more accepting there. Or maybe Durham was a more successful location because there Drag Bingo had less competition for its crowd with other weekend activities.

It is worth noting the exclusive success of Drag Bingo in Durham, because it says a lot about the cultural scene there. Raleigh, as the capital city, is more crowded, busy, and urban. Chapel Hill is a tight little college town. But both have something Durham does not: a distinctly visible gay scene. Raleigh has a gay district or “gayborhood” with gay nightlife and shops. In Chapel Hill, gay culture emanates from the shops and bars that line Franklin Street. Durham has not yet filled that capacity. It is, however, beginning to develop as an artistic cultural center that has room for the expression of gay culture. Construction projects downtown are revamping the area where the Armory is located, turning it into a place of arts, cuisine, shopping, and other attractions. Brian said, “We’re riding the wave of downtown revitalization. Downtown Durham used to not be cool, but now people don’t flinch. It had a crappy reputation as being dangerous, now people can’t perpetuate that because of all the cool stuff going on downtown.”²⁸ As Brian’s remark indicates, the notions of safety and visibility are ideologically embedded within place. Ultimately, these general feelings about a place can have a significant command over the cultural behavior in there.

²⁸ Brian Denton, formal interview, November 23, 2009.

II. A Closer Look At Durham, North Carolina

I was born in Durham, North Carolina in 1988. Despite the beautiful June day, I am told it was unbearably stuffy in the un-air-conditioned old Duke South maternity wing. I have heard countless times that I was *the last baby born* in that hospital before it was rebuilt. In those days the only women who gave birth at the Duke Hospital were uninsured. My mom recalls that the ward was gloomy and rundown, like “something out of another century” and that the majority of mothers were unwed, teenage, and mostly African American who were all screaming and giving birth at the same time. Today the Duke South part of hospital has been transformed into beautiful outpatient clinics.

My family moved to High Point when I was two years old so I do not remember our brick house on Brenrose Circle with the back yard and yellow bedroom curtains. Nor do I remember playing in the Duke Gardens, going to the toyshop on Ninth Street, checkups at Dr. Osterhaut’s office, or my babysitter Mrs. Lopassy. I was a part of the Durham community back then and I was not old enough to be aware of it.

I returned to Durham in 2006 when I matriculated into Duke University’s liberal arts college. It took me a while to find my bearings in Durham. As a freshman (or freshperson), I ventured primarily to shopping centers and movie theaters. Occasionally, I found myself lost downtown in search of a restaurant, poorly navigating the criss-crossing, curving, one-way streets that never took me back to where I expected. As a senior, I have become much more familiar with the city of Durham. I can tell you all about the Scrap Exchange, where I have purchased donated odds and ends to use for my art projects. I experienced a beautiful and inspiring masterpiece at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival of 2008. I have run in the Great Human Race 5K with other community members in support of local charities. I spent

the summer after my sophomore year in Durham working as a camp councilor and coach at Bull City Gymnastics. I have attended Durham's monthly Art Walk at the Golden Belt Studio and gotten to know some of the artists who work there. I have spent time hanging out at local live music venues like Broad Street Café or Alivia's interacting with Durhamites and Duke students alike, and have sung Karaoke at Charlie's Neighborhood Bar. I have bought fresh vegetables at the downtown Farmer's Market and attended Bull City Football Fest 2009 at the old Durham Athletic Park right down the road. Most recently, I have discovered the community of Drag Bingo and begun to integrate myself into it.

My adventures have given me familiarity and comfort with Durham, but my mental map still places a city around a large university center. In the six semesters and one summer that I have spent in Durham, I have merely dipped into some of the cultural activities you might see on the visitor's information website. Certainly, the website celebrates a lot of the really cool activities going on in Durham, but this information is promotional propaganda that is one-sided. My distorted mental image of Durham arises from the fact that I am the one on the periphery. When I think about the city of Durham, I think about innovative cultural opportunities. When I experience these opportunities, I feel a sense of involvement in the community. But this view lacks a whole reality of people who are working, living, going to school, and going to church.

The divide between Duke and Durham is both visual and psychic. Where West Chapel Hill Street becomes Duke University Road, there is a nearly instantaneous shift in the scenery. When driving past Duke, you might feel that you have been transported to another place. The post-industrial city disappears as you enter a new territory. Tall trees line both sides of the

winding road, blocking out the buildings and highways, their long branches forming pointed arches that mimic the neo-gothic architecture on West Campus. In the four years that I have been a Duke student, I have repeatedly heard of the legendary Duke-Durham divide, from students, staff, and even people who live elsewhere in North Carolina and seem to know of strains between the university and non-university communities of Durham. The tensions that people seem to feel are tensions of class, race, and locale. Duke is a nationally prestigious, top-tier, private university with incredible financial resources. The total cost to attend Duke has reached \$53,390 for 2009-2010²⁹, and the estimated median household income for Durham in 2007 was \$45,888³⁰. In other words, the cost to attend Duke for a year is more than what at least half of the households in Durham can earn for their entire household for that year. The university represents opportunity and social mobility, but mainly students who already come from wealthy and advantaged backgrounds are able to afford the cost. As a result, very few Duke students are from Durham. Only 13% of the class of 2013 is from North Carolina at all, with 77% from all over the United States and 10% international students from over 50 different countries.³¹ Duke is situated in Durham but it does not directly serve the city, educating its majority out-of-towners instead. Thus, the idea of a Duke-Durham divide is also premised on a clash between the long-standing locals of Durham and the vast numbers of transplant citizens that the University imports.³²

Furthermore, the university's undergraduate housing policy fosters a closed community. Duke students are required to live on-campus for three years save for a few

²⁹ Duke university admissions: Cost & financial aid. in Office of Undergraduate Admissions [database online]. Durham, NC, November 23, 2009]. Available from <http://www.admissions.duke.edu/jump/applying/finaid.html>.

³⁰ Durham, north carolina (NC) profile [cited November 23 2009]. Available from <http://www.city-data.com/city/Durham-North-Carolina.html>.

³¹ Duke university admissions: Class of 2013 profile in Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Duke University [database online]. Durham, NC, [cited November 23 2009]. Available from <http://www.admissions.duke.edu>.

³² Chris Purcell, formal interview, November 13, 2009.

exceptions, encouraging students to interact with other students and being involved in the campus culture. The result of this system is that most students never truly integrate into the Durham community and many hardly leave campus at all.

Regardless, Duke University is an important force in the city of Durham. Durham is not a college town because the city was established well before the university was built. Nevertheless, Duke has brought a lot to the city. Previously named Trinity College, the university moved to Durham from Randolph County, opening in 1892.³³ At the time Durham was already buzzing with the production and sale of tobacco and textiles. During and after the American Civil War, Durham's Brightleaf Tobacco became known for its unique "mellow" flavor, allegedly created when a slave accidentally built his fire too quickly and baked the tobacco at a high temperature.³⁴ The war spurred the tobacco boom, dispersing the product to Northern and Southern soldiers alike who left the war craving that Durham flavor. According to the Durham Convention and Visitor's Bureau, Yankee and Rebel soldiers at the ceasefire in Durham celebrated together by smoking tobacco that would eventually found one of the world's largest corporations including American Tobacco, Liggett & Meyers, R.J. Reynolds, and P. Lorillard.³⁵ Soon after the Civil War, the previously small hamlet used as a trading and shipping center attracted businesses and workers. In 1893, Erwin Cotton Mills were built in Durham, during the post-war Reconstruction of the South and shift of American textile industry from the North to the South where labor was cheaper. With 11,000 spindles

³³ King, William E. Trinity college moves to durham. in Duke University Archives [database online]. Durham, NC, October 5, 2007 [cited March 3 2010]. Available from <http://library.duke.edu/uarchives/history/histnotes/move>.

³⁴ Wise, James E., 1949-. *Durham : A bull city story*Charleston, SC : Arcadia, c2002, 25.

³⁵ Durham history at A glance. in Durham Convention & Visitors Bureau [database online]. [cited March 3 2010]. Available from http://www.durham-nc.com/about/overview-facts-history/history_glance.php.

and 360 looms, Erwin Cotton Mills pioneered Durham's textile manufacturing sector.³⁶ With tobacco and textiles spearheading the economic formation of Durham, banking, railroads, other industries, and general urban developments followed suit.

Despite economic success, Durham's industrial, working atmosphere earned the small city a reputation as blue-collar and second rate in comparison with the "historic", "aristocratic", and "cultured" cities of Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Hillsboro.³⁷ Local educators, endowed figures, and Durham's Methodist and Baptist presence vied to start a private university in Durham. The 1880s marked a period of struggles, letdowns, and failed attempts to bring such a school to Durham. This difficulty was in part due to general doubt in the city of Durham to succeed or to cultivate a positive environment for students. Many opposed Methodist and Baptist attempts to create a Christian women's college in Durham because the city was seen as too brash and dangerous for young women. Despite initial trouble, a combination of financial finagling, land from wealthy citizen donors, and political pressure ultimately kick started an education movement for which each persistent step brought the city closer to its goal. In 1887, a Yale graduate John Franklin Crowell became president of Randolph County's Trinity College. In the Spirit of the Ivy League, Crowell aggressively transformed the small college. Besides a new curriculum and professional faculty, Crowell pushed to transform Trinity College by moving the country college to a city. Raleigh at first seemed the choice city, but Durham had wealthy entrepreneurs dedicated to the cause. The owner of a prosperous Tobacco company Mr. Washington Duke personally offered to pay

³⁶ Fairbrother, Al. Old west durham neighborhood association [cited March 3 2010]. Available from <http://www.owdna.org/mill.htm>.

³⁷ Boyd, Helen. *My husband betty : Love, sex, and life with a crossdresser* Berkeley, CA : Seal Press, [2008?], 159.

\$50,000 more than Raleigh's highest bid and the college moved to Durham with its first endowment and new name: Duke University.³⁸

Having a university helped Durham become a more refined city in a number of ways. The university's influence ignited collegiate training for Durham's youth. At first the university enrolled students from outside Durham, but eventually it served to educate local students as well. Writing in 1927, a Duke University history professor William Kenneth Boyd claimed that the local university patronage had increased to over thirty percent.³⁹ Both by educating its Durham's own youth and bring in college students from elsewhere, Duke increased the city's educated leadership. Likewise, university faculty organized social projects, founding Durham's Public Library, instating a managerial government, and strengthening the public school system. Ultimately, the university's influence drew a middle class to Durham.⁴⁰

Over the years, Duke University has brought knowledge, research, and wealth to the area and it has become an integral player in the local economy. Statistics from the Durham Chamber of Commerce collected in 2007 reported that Duke employs 30,551 people directly. The second largest employer is International Business Machines (IBM) with 11,530 employees in 2007.⁴¹ IBM and other hi-tech companies are located in Durham as the result of the university driven technological manufacturing hub the Research Triangle. As textile production has gradually been carried overseas, Durham's manufacturing sector has become increasingly connected to Duke University's research. Renowned for its research in

³⁸ Ibid., 159-173.

³⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Largest employers in durham county, 2007. in Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce [database online]. [cited March 3 2010]. Available from http://www.durhamchamber.org/business/climate/largest_employers.html.

biomedicine, Duke is privy to expanding healthcare and pharmaceutical industries. Duke University Health System currently plans to build two new buildings: an expanded surgical and critical-care Medical Pavilion and a new cancer center, together occupying 850,000 square feet. Construction will create 1,500 temporary jobs and eventually the new services will provide 1,000 permanent jobs for Durham citizens.⁴² With a public indication of the close cooperation between the university and pharmaceutical industry, Duke's current president Richard Broadhead honored Ernest Mario with the University Medal for Distinguished Meritorious Service at the University's 108th Founder's Day celebration in 2009. Mario is president of GlaxoSmithKline, a leading pharmaceutical company and fourth largest employer of Durham (following Durham Public Schools). Mario is the second-longest serving trustee in the university's history and was the founding chair of the board for Duke University Health System.⁴³ Mario's award is a high honor named for great service to the university. Money, prestige, investments, profits, research, progress. Without saying so, the award symbolizes the mutual importance of the industry and the institution of higher education to the initiatives of the other. Undoubtedly, Duke University has been significant in the economic development of Durham. With awareness of the negative health effects of smoking and the closure of Erwin Cotton Mills in the late 1980s as textiles shifted overseas, one might even suggest that Duke has been essential to the economic survival of Durham.

Besides big business, the economic welfare of local, family-owned business within the perimeter of the campus is also highly dependent on the university. Duke University represents a dense concentration of wealth, not just in its endowments, but also in the pockets of a great number of its students and faculty. In May of 2009, I went to University Shell on

⁴² Bliwise, Robert J. (Editor). 2009. *Gazette Duke Magazine*. November – December, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Hillsborough Road to get my oil changed before leaving campus for the semester. I wanted to write a check but there was a clear sign spelling out NO CHECKS at the register. I asked just to be sure. The woman who was ringing me up started to explain their policy, then looked at me a little closer and asked if I was a student around here. When she found out I went to Duke, she threw her no check policy right out the window, beaming at me. *It's okay*, I remember her telling the man who shared her shift, *she's a Duke student*. The woman proceeded to tell me all about their great towing service and handed me piles of business cards to share with my friends. I believe she made an exception for me that day not simply because she felt that I was good for my money, but because gaining the business of lots of university students was more economically advantageous than being a stickler for cash and credit cards only. The interaction was slightly uncomfortable for me, like many that I have experienced since accepting admission to Duke in 2006. I have come to find that Duke defines my subjectivity and articulates my class status, both intellectually and economically. It sets me apart. In addition, my skin is white, completing the trinity of privilege the woman read right off my body. Thus, I could get away with wearing baggy, ripped jeans and a loose tee shirt and still convince the woman that I was wealthy. Through this subjectivity I see rather clearly that Duke is marked by all kinds of assumptions, assumptions that I am hyper-aware. But the fact that Duke stands out as characteristically different is not really a problem of its own right. It is the recognition and emphasis on this hierarchical difference that causes tension. In a society not so far removed from Jim Crow segregation, Americans are tuned to the idea of equality and it is unnerving to us when we realize we cannot match everything up as totally equal.

Duke's tedious financial relationship with its surrounding community has forged an interesting university conscience focused on the idea of social responsibility. Today, Duke has a deliberate mind of its role in the community and wants to appear to be a big brother to the community that helps to improve the city of Durham rather than competing with it for resources. Through the years Duke has made many positive impacts in the city of Durham, from bringing wealth and stimulating economic growth, to propelling education, bringing a middle class with an interest in culture, and leading philanthropy projects; Duke has also made relations with its community more awkward than necessary at time. Certainly, some longstanding local residents harbor resentment toward Duke. In a perfect illustration of this bitterness towards Duke from non-university involved Durham residents, Mary Roberts Holt, a former resident of Brookstown, spoke out at a Durham City Council meeting on April 6, 2009. Brookstown was an African-American settlement around Swift Street that was scattered with one-story houses belonging to mill and tobacco factory workers. Today, the remains of Brookstown lie below the Durham Freeway 147, and Holt blames Duke for her loss of land.⁴⁴

*The people from Brookstown are not being recognized. See we were pushed out and now we can't drive down Maxville cause they gone put up gates. I was born and raised right over there where that power plant is. And now you telling me, that you gonna put gates so I can't drive down there --- and not only me, black people. That was our community. We didn't ask nobody for nothing. Our parents worked on the plantation and in the fields and that Liggett and Myers and American Tobacco Company to be free and it didn't need Duke. And duke has been coming through and taking over. They took 147 and wiped out Brookstown and now no vehicles.*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Fairbrother.

⁴⁵ Mary roberts holt at durham city council meeting [cited March 29, 2010 Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AmoDB86bk8>.

Holt went on to explain that she had been relocated to Hope Valley when Duke bought all the land of her old community. She summed up her speech asking the mayor and the city council to think about the impact their decisions have on older folks like her whose children have to drive them to see where they used to live. When she stepped down from the podium her presentation was met with loud applause.⁴⁶ Holt's speech is an excellent illustration of the tension between the university and the longstanding locals.

The relationship between Duke and Durham is symbiotic but not equally weighted. The two are complexly separate yet integrated. These layers of tension, congeniality, and interdependency are significant to the social space of Durham as it relates to contemporary gender and sexuality. "The universities are the history here," Chris Purcell told me when I interviewed him in his office at the LGBT center at Duke. I wanted to find out what Durham was like as a place for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or of queer or alternative gender. Chris explained to me that Durham is comprised of a mixture of "established local folks" (those with a long historical connection to the city) and "transplant upper class folks". From his explanation, I gathered that the combination of the two groups, despite any delicate relations between them, has positive effect on Durham's queer life. Chris felt that because the transplant folks come from diverse hometowns, that they bring a variety of cultural backgrounds to the area, making Durham more receptive to gender and sexual difference. I think this notion is true to an extent. Diversity of perspectives can only go so far within the institutional privilege of the Duke community. Part of the receptiveness that Chris feels comes from his position as a white, male who is affiliated with Duke.

While the bringing of new people to Durham can sometimes be a way to expand comfort zones, tension arises from the categorization of these groups "transplant" and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

“local”. The distinction of these groups is based on assumed differences between “locals” and “transplants.” It is probably accurate to say that the “transplant” community has increased receptiveness to non-normativity in Durham; it is ignorant to link queerness to the “transplants” and fixed social constraint to the “locals.” It is further problematic to assume that every positive step is transplant derived and never from the deep-seated locality. Such assumptions lend themselves to actually *creating* resistance to non-normativity. For instance, Chris Purcell described a recent city council event that was important to many Duke LGBT affiliates that underscores the foolishness of such assumptions. The event was August 17, 2009 when a Durham citizen asked the city council to make a statement in support of same sex marriage.⁴⁷ According to Chris who knows people who attended, there was an unusually large “transplant” presence crowding the halls at the meeting and an overabundance of people were prepared to make a case for the statement. Nevertheless, there was really no controversy and the council ruled unanimously in favor of drafting the statement. Overwhelming and atypical applause met the decision then immediately the crowd of “transplant” folks stood up and left. Apparently the regular attendees shook their heads disapprovingly, annoyed at the assertive behavior of the “transplants.” The entire interaction it seems was premised on the assumption that there would be a big controversy and that Durham would be unreceptive to the pro-gay marriage proposal. It also linked Duke with LGBT activism while conveying that the Duke/activist did not care about what is going on in Durham beyond these special self-interests. In fact, queer organizations of Durham such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) were responsible for spreading word and amassing support for the

⁴⁷ Spaulding, Pam. Durham city council to vote on measure in support of marriage equality. [cited March 29, 2010 Available from <http://www.pamshouseblend.com/diary/12483/durham-city-council-to-vote-on-measure-in-support->.

statement.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this linking of “transplant” community, LGBT rights activism, and slightly unruly behavior can create a kind of backlash to the positive effects of mixing people of many cultural backgrounds. When “transplant” and “local” get pitted against each other, the impact on gender and sexual liberalism is repressive and disruptive.

Besides these longstanding historical foundations of the Durham community, more recent events are also important to the socio-political landscape. Durham’s local newspaper *The Harold Sun* published an article entitled Top 10 Stories of the Decade on December 31, 2009. Despite its brief, catchy presentation, the article describes a great deal about the changing city and its present day climate. Much can be learned from the ten most significant news events for Durham in the past decade.

The first most important news story of the decade was the Duke Lacrosse Case, which received a great deal of national press in 2006, when three Duke students who were varsity lacrosse players got accused of raping an exotic dancer at an off-campus party. The case quickly blew up as a national scandal and led to a lengthy trial. However, questionable legal procedures and the gradual discovery that the accusations were false turned the case on its head; the Duke students became the victims and the prosecuting attorney Mike Nifong became the scapegoat for the state’s judicial oversights.

The second greatest story of the decade also involved a university student, except this time she belonged to the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her name was Eve Carson and she was murdered in 2008, shot dead on the street. Eve was a model student, with many honors to her name including the prestigious Morehead-Cain Scholarship, and not to mention the student body president. Her death caused shock, outrage, remorse, and fear in her community. The two men (Lovett and Atwater) charged with her murder were from

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Durham, and Lovett and a third man were also charged with the murder of a Duke Graduate student who was attacked in his apartment a few months before Eve was shot. While Lovett was underage at the time of the murders, his penalties are somewhat less severe, but Atwater has been sentenced to death.

It is interesting that the top two stories of the decade both involved the community's relationship with university students. Both reflected the American news media's habit of generating fear and paranoia and consolidating as the object of these fears the category of the sexual predator. The stories both teetered between shifting ideas of victim and victimized. The lacrosse story first told the public to fear and hate the white, male Duke students. Symbolizing privilege, these students quickly became the aggressors, accused of *raping* underserved (minority and lower-class) Americans. Duke in all its looked threatening to the community of Durham. Yet at some point, the boundaries of victim and victimized completely reversed and many Americans quickly rallied to the defense the Duke boys who had been robbed of their rights by the state judiciary system. The boys had initially been stripped of their privilege as white, male Duke students and portrayed as criminals. But suddenly their power was restored as everyone looked from their mug shots to the pictures of them in button-down tops and blazers.

The United States has a long tradition of rights-based governmental theory, but in practice it has denied many rights those who do not belong to the dominant power groups. The impulse to accuse the white males was a natural response in the context of the constant struggle to achieve political correctness by not offending any ethnic or cultural identity groups, particularly highly oppressed minorities. Perhaps the subsequent reversal reflected a desire to move past these tensions in order to protect the rights of everyone. I have my

doubts. When the story changed it became one that has been retold over and over. The exotic dancer, no longer the innocent victim, was now malicious and hypersexual. Her loose sexual activity was used against her. She was imagined as disease ridden and filthy. By taking advantage of an encounter with the white, wealthier men's lacrosse team, she had preyed on American lives. It was an age-old tale, a physical representation of American fears.

I was seventeen when the Duke Lacrosse story broke and Duke had just offered me undergraduate admission. The story was quintessentially ugly. Nearly everyone who heard that I would be going to Duke, snickered "Stay away from those Lacrosse guys!" I quickly learned to brush off the comments, but even their sardonic tones were loaded with meaning. I was a female soon to enter a threatening environment. Living for the first time without my parents, I would have to face a world of rambunctious college parties and all the dangers associated with them: drugs, underage drinking, and promiscuous sex. I felt that people interpreted me as weak and vulnerable. Simultaneously, I felt accused. Snide remarks about the lacrosse scandal held a residual sting of suspicion and warning. *Be good*, I felt them saying, judging me by my age demographic. When Eve Carson was murdered, I was a freshman and the reaction I felt from adults was similar yet more somber. Everyone despaired over the loss of the vibrant young scholar, full of potential she could no longer achieve. Everyone stood behind UNC-Chapel Hill, rallying to protect the students while hunting down the murderers (black males who wore corn-row braids and hooded sweatshirts⁴⁹). This time I was less of a target for judgment, but more of a target for anxiety. Adults constantly urged caution. Against my will, I was bounced between being overly protected and mistrusted. Simultaneous, my race and class privileges marked me as

⁴⁹ MANHUNT: Atwater down, lovette loose in NC Wanted [database online]. [cited March 29, 2010 Available from http://www.ncwanted.com/ncwanted_home/story/2567815/].

empowered and powerless. It had given me resources that others lacked, but made me a walking symbol of oppression and a target of hostility.

The stories are significant because they convey the importance both of social power hierarchies and of fear to the formation of American sexual subjectivities. They emphasize the relationship between the universities and their surrounding communities and show the dual forces at work that obscure this relationship. I talked at great length in this chapter about the complex relationship between Duke and Durham, because the duality of fear and protection in this community is absolutely central to the conditioning of sexual and gender identity.

The dual relationship of fear and protection between Duke and Durham is a significant force when it comes to the LGBTQ atmosphere. In my interviews, I asked people about Durham as an LGBTQ-friendly (or unfriendly) space. Repeatedly, people pointed to the university as one of the most important factors when they spoke about this issue. Chris Purcell, the programming coordinator at Duke's Center for LGBT Life, spoke to me about the how the University can be a positive force in the community by bringing in a wider mix of people and creating a well integrated atmosphere, rather than a straight-ordered community, offset by a gay district. Instead the LGBT people and places are more interwoven into the general community, rather than a separate cultural entity. As a result LGBT Duke students "must seek out a gay community and piece together a gay existence in the Triangle." This "piecing together" forces Duke LGBT students to circulate the Triangle rather than staying contained on Duke's campus like many students. However, not all students have their own cars and public transportation can be unreliable, particularly at night.

Thus, for LGBT students that do not or cannot often stray far from Duke, their own campus LGBT scene is that much culture more removed from their them.

Chris told me that due to the cultural mixture brought in by the university, Durham is pretty accepting of its LGBT community members. “Even the people I know wouldn’t agree with me, I see in their faces a live and let live mentality...There are very few places I feel unsafe in Durham.” Chris is originally from an area 45 minutes South of Boston, Massachusetts, a region known for being more socially liberal and an easier place to fit in as LGBT. Yet, he came to Durham and found the small city in the South a nurturing environment for gay life. Likewise, Brian Denton, an employee of the Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP) for middle and high school students and a performer at Drag Bingo known as Sierra Nevada, told me about how he felt more comfortable in Durham than in his small hometown in Asheville, North Carolina. Brian came to Duke as an undergraduate and “never left,” working in a variety of Duke jobs since 1991. He told me that:

Durham is a good place to be out. There’s such a funky mix of people and on the whole its pretty socially liberal. I see Durham in a more holistic way. Raleigh and Chapel Hill are more cliquy. Because Durham has such a funky mix... people are more casual about what everyone else is doing. I love the racial mix in Durham. In Asheville all black people lived in one part of town and none went to my school. Twenty years ago Durham was forty-five percent African American. I’m used to it now, so when I go other places, it bugs me that it’s not that way. And the Hispanic population is growing. I feel more comfortable in a mixed environment and I feel like the city is doing something right when people are mixed and not going separate ways. That may be part of why Bingo does good here.

According to the perspectives of Brian and Chris, Duke brings a flavorful diversity to Durham that is comforting in its richness and prepares people to be more accepting of difference. Nevertheless, Duke is a force of power that commands an elite value system. Speaking from my personal experience as an undergraduate, Duke is *not* a place of LGBT or

queer visibility for students or faculty. One of my close friends articulated this really well when I interviewed her at our house.⁵⁰ Liz, also a senior here at Duke, is a straight-identified girl who is well integrated into the LGBT campus community and, a social butterfly, into the undergraduate community in general. When I attended the LGBT Center's Ally Training Program, one of the presentation slides displayed a picture of her enthusiastically holding a huge LOVE=LOVE sign on the plaza, taken on coming out day our freshman year. Liz also has a bunch of LGBT, queer, and questioning friends who live in Chapel Hill and she has been to gay nightclubs in both cities. I interviewed Liz to find out her perspective on the vibe of Durham and Duke and the relationship between them in the context of LGBT life. She felt that though Duke brings people to Durham from all over the US and internationally, that it is not concocting an atmosphere of openness but instead one of high expectations for a limited view of success. In the past few years, I have heard so many people describe the expectation that female students must convey a sense of "effortless perfection." Greek life dominates the social scene on campus, creating a caricatured standard for masculinity and femininity. These domineering social expectations funnel the students into constricted social roles and squelch out expressions of non-normativity. According to Liz, LGBT students have a closed community and are generally invisible on campus. The Center for LGBT Life itself is in the basement of the building where the west campus-dining hall is located. I went to this dining hall all the time, but I did not even know there *was* a basement there until halfway through my sophomore year. It is not exactly a place admissions tour guides proudly take their tour groups. The Center is concealed so that people can come anonymously if they need support. Liz told me that she had once received an anonymous email detailing how to come anonymously through the back entrance if she sought the Center's support services.

⁵⁰ Liz Hall, formal interview, February 8, 2010.

According to Liz, this suppression of “visibility” is a huge problem on campus and in Durham somewhat as a result of Duke. Liz is from near Bloomington, Indiana where the gay community is possibly over-visible with pride flags everywhere. There are many shops that are “out” with rainbow flags and umbrellas, but this pride has nothing to do with the product that the stores are selling, like the ordinary cooking store. “I don’t agree with it. It’s a marketing strategy, not a social strategy... When you need business, signal the gays!” Liz has identified the fact that sexuality and sexual orientation have become commodified within late-stage capitalism and that commodities have largely become a means of expressing visibility for something that is supposed to be about internal feelings and desires. The hyper-commercial world seems to represent limitless possibility and in some ways facilitates exploration beyond the normative realm. It is easier to visibly express sexuality or play with gender in a super-visual place. Such commercial visibility is part of the reason why huge city centers like New York City and San Francisco were early sites for the development of a visible gay culture in America.

Durham is far from a New York or a San Francisco, or even a Bloomington. Liz described Bloomington as having “waves” of stronger LGBT visibility, but that “you always know it’s there.” Yet in Durham, there are the “same waves” with the annual Pride Festival, the Gay-Lesbian Film Festival, or the occasional LGBT programming at Bull City Headquarters. But as she pointed out, and I agree, “In Durham, you can’t always feel the gay community. In Chapel Hill, you can.” Chapel Hill is centered around one main street, Franklin Street, that is lined boutiques, restaurants, bakeries, bookstores and ‘zine’ shops, bars, nightclubs, and live music venues. On the sidewalk, there are typically small groups of amateur music artists beating bongos or playing the acoustic guitar for a few tips. There is

college-town vibrancy reflected in the assorted people you find walking around. There are the trendy males with skinny leg jeans, tight graphic tee shirts and eclectic accessories. You also have the hippy kids wearing a grungier dreadlocked, ripped baggy pants, and corn-cob pipe look. Plenty of people sport the I'm-just-an-average-college-student look complete with running shorts and a loose Carolina blue tee shirt. You also find young middle-class couples with children in strollers or more established, ritzy people who live in the grand Victorian houses in East Chapel Hill. Unlike Duke's campus, physically isolated as its own semi-self-sufficient island within Durham, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a college that is part of the town. This openness also enables queer visibility because the fluidity of campus and community, particularly in an artsy area, generates a sense of diversity, making counter-normal self-expression more comfortable and less shocking.

On the other hand, Duke's campus feels physically enclosed. New students tend to gush over the tall gothic buildings lining the main quads on Duke's west-campus, but by junior and senior year, this fortress begins to feel quite confining.⁵¹ All the diverse faces you saw at freshman orientation begin to blend into one image: the typical Duke student. As for the LGBT scene, it is dominated by white, upper-middle class males and is a closed community invisible to outsiders. As such, non-normative sexuality and gender become a big secret. It is impossible to come out to a small group of friends without most of the student body knowing about it. Liz highlighted this point more me, describing outness as a choice of all or nothing. She said, "If you're not 100% out, you're vulnerable. So you're either shoved in the closet or forced way out." She felt that the vast majority of students tend to conform to

⁵¹ Duke junior, informal conversation, March 19, 2010 & Duke senior, informal communication, March 22, 2010.

a certain “conservative” set of values and image, cultivated by the small enclosed and gossip-ridden campus. I see this conformity in terms of Foucault’s concept of discipline, in which the students are constantly surveying their own actions and responding to what they perceive as normal behavior and the relationship of their own behavior to these norms.⁵² “Can you imagine if it was gay night at Shooters [the main nightclub that undergraduates attend] and you saw a bunch of people outside waiting to get in?” she prompted. “It’s usually kept within the gay community. People don’t want others to know.” Our freshman year, Liz made a drastic change in her appearance. She had her long flowing black hair chopped into a mohawk, which she eventually cut into a short haircut. This minor act was not so minor for Duke. She told me “I was so self-conscious when I cut my hair. I was involved in the Union then and lived on campus. If I can’t even go out without a shaved head and feel comfortable, how can you feel comfortable being out as a lesbian and liking girls.”⁵³ People have also told me that many LGBT kids who were “out” in high school come to Duke and get forced back into the closet. But the fact that Duke’s conservative ideal is closeting people is a bigger than just a campus issue because it ripples over into the community.

Even beyond the architecture, there is some kind of barrier on every side of Duke keeping it self-contained from the outside community. With Duke Forest to the South, the executive offices and medical campus of Erwin Road to the North, and a stone wall around East Campus, Duke feels completely protected. Protected from what? The criminals who murdered Eve Carson and Abhijit Mahato? Its own Lacrosse students living off-campus and their sketchy parties? The district attorney who unfairly prosecuted these students for the

⁵² Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *The history of sexuality*. Histoire de la sexualité. english. New York : Vintage Books, 1980- , c1978-.

⁵³ Liz Hall, formal interview, February 8, 2010.

accused rape of the strippers they hired? The forty-three percent African-Americans residents? The fifty percent of households whose income was below \$44, 000 in 2004?⁵⁴

Around 1 a.m. on Saturday March 13, 2010 the Duke Police Department received a call about a “suspicious person” outside of the Duke University Hospital.⁵⁵ The officers came to the hospital and an “altercation” between the two officers and the person, a man who has been identified as 25-year-old Aaron Lorenzo Dorsey.⁵⁶ The Duke police released a statement claiming, “After other options failed to stop the individual, the other officer discharged his firearm one time, fatally wounding Mr. Dorsey.”⁵⁷ Most of the details released about this case have been vague, while the State investigates the case. From the various regional newspaper articles I have found online, I have been unable to find a picture of Dorsey or any mention of his race, but I am suspicious that racial profiling may have been involved or that the Duke officers confronting Dorsey in a way that provoked him. One article claims the Police Chief said that Dorsey had tried to reach for one of the officers’ gun and that the other officer only fired the shot “after other options failed.”⁵⁸ No information about the officers’ behavior toward the man has been released or how the altercation came to be. However, two people who knew Dorsey posted comments below one of the articles. Latoya Bivens (godsister) wrote:

This is senseless Aaron relocated this state from michigan, to have a better life... What could cause him to be dead at a hospital were people are suppose to have patience and understanding. Mr.Dorsey respected the law and had just lost him mother last month the last thing on his mind wasn't to harm anyone, I'm sure of that, he will forever be missed

⁵⁴ Dempsey, Spencer. 2008. *Durham & durham county, north carolina 2008* Durham, NC: Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce.

⁵⁵ Ferreri, Eric. Duke says man tried to grab gun, was shot. , <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/03/18/394560/duke-says-man-tried-to-grab-gun.html>.

⁵⁶ Rupp, Lindsey. Man shot and killed at hospital. *The Chronicle* (March 15, 2010), <http://dukechronicle.com>. & Police ID man killed in shooting outside duke hospital. (March 17, 2010), <http://durhamcounty.mync.com>.

⁵⁷ News & Observer

⁵⁸ mync.com

Keisha Folds wrote:

I knew Mr. Dorsey, he lived in my house along with his girlfriend, and as i got to know Mr. Dorsey,he rubbed off on me as a stand up type of guy, very friendly, love kids, and this type of incident doesnt seem to real. Mr.Dorsey was NOT the type of person, tha would try to take a gun from an officer. Now that's my opinion⁵⁹

Regardless of what the State will determine and the later details to emerge, this case is a perfect example of the teetering relationship of fear and protection surrounding the university. It speaks to the racial tension, the class power dynamics, and the separation of cultural spheres. In reality, Duke and Durham have a symbiotic relationship that no amount of trees, stone, and corporate concrete can separate. Its barriers are not ironclad, but more like a semi-permeable membrane of mutual influence. But these barriers mark their ideological opposition and their relationship of fear and protection, Duke and Durham each threatening to invade each other's ideological spheres.

The University has conflicting roles, in some ways attempting to create a safe space for students with its physical shield. It also contributes to the "funky mix" of people and a more tolerant and receptive community. Nevertheless, its protection can only go so far without causing harm. Its sheltered campus squelches difference and causes conformity to polarized ideals of masculinity and femininity. It suppresses visibility and closes off opportunities in the outside world.

The shooting of Aaron Dorsey shows how the United States is a nation ridden with fear and paranoia. This fear revolves around issues of sexual repression and negativity. Much of it is generated by the media, which hypes the threat of sexual predation pervasively, particularly with respect to the hypersexed, criminalized black male. This fear is central to our formation of sexual and gender subjectivity.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

III. Historical Institutions of Sexual Fear

The United States' sexual politics and ideologies are determined by a constant conflict between the deeply rooted history of sexual repression and fear and the ubiquitous, hyper-erotic imagery of contemporary consumer culture. In the contemporary United States, sex is confusing, restricted, and embarrassing, but it is also everywhere. Look to the left and you will be sexually seduced by a giant advertisement for a double cheeseburger. Look to the right and you know you just need to buy that new raspberry scented shaving cream so you can be just like the beautiful sexy goddess with super smooth legs. But shhh! Sex is not something that you should easily talk about and if you are going to talk about it you better be doing it right.

The contemporary sexed and gender subject wears many historical layers. In order to understand this subject, it is important to strip these layers by analyzing the historical forces that shape his or her body. This chapter is dedicated the formation of America's sexual culture over time focusing on several main factors: colonialism and slavery, science and an emphasis on biological bodies, legislative repression and normalization, and the influence of late-stage capitalism. I will discuss the way in which all of these forces have created a general atmosphere for sexuality of intense fear, a lack of discussion, repression, and strict regulation.

First, I will discuss the impact of Colonialism and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade because it would be naïve to omit these institutions' vast legacy. European Imperialism was a competition for wealth and power that existed in Europe between Europeans. The colonies were simply the means through which the European countries vied for power, striving to amass more natural resources and control larger areas of overseas territory than the others.

New technologies that increased marine mobility enabled Europe to establish a transcontinental economic system of overseas conquest and the seizure of resources and labor. The system only worked by conquering the indigenous people of these overseas territories and establishing a system of dominance over them.

The circumstances of Colonialism led to a prolific creation of cultural ideologies premised on hierarchy of rights, ownership, and privilege. In her article “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures”, Ann Stoler analyzes the ways in which gender inequality was essential to the assertion of European supremacy and how forms of sexual control protected the categories of “colonizer” and “colonized.”⁶⁰ Concubinage also reinforced white domination by preventing the existence of “poor whites” drained of wealth in trying to provide a middle-class lifestyle for their European wives.⁶¹ However, this system was ideologically contradictory. While it established a direct hierarchical control for the short term, in its catalyzing of racial mixing and creation of racially ambiguous children, concubinage threatened the idea of racial superiority.⁶²

Europeans living in the colonies were removed from their parental land and thus were quite vulnerable. Their entire culture and way of life was at stake. Racial mixing became linked to the idea of cultural and moral degeneracy. As such, interracial and promiscuous sex became a morally degenerate act. Thus arose a strict regulation of sexuality through the policing of who could have sex with whom. These restrictions led to ideas about disease as being both physical and moral, or psychological and the belief that sexual release was

⁶⁰ Stoler, Ann. Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th-century colonial cultures. *American Ethnologist* 16, (4) (Nov., 1989): 634-635.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 639.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 638, 647.

harmful. Treating these afflictions entailed “sexual moderation, a ‘regularity and regimentation’ of work, abstemious diet, physical exercise and *European* comradery, buttressed by a solid family life with European children, raised and nurtured by a European wife.”⁶³ Along with the focus on sexual restraint, a gendered division of labor developed with men outside the home working in society and women confined to the household. White women represented extreme sexual purity and were expected to keep their husbands from sexual deviancy. They were equally responsible for running the household and raising children, leading to the idea that childrearing was a national duty during the late nineteenth century.⁶⁴

Besides the sexual disciplining that occurred during colonialism, the four-hundred year trans-Atlantic Slave Trade has had a massive impact on American sexual subjectivity in its creation of sexual terror through slave codes. Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Seduction: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* describes the precarious nature of the slavery as a legal institution. By her analysis, law regarded as both *persons and property* in order to legitimize the use of physical and sexual domination to force slaves into submission. The law considered slaves both “will-less and always willing,” and said that slaves could only exercise will in a way to serve their masters. Thus, the law invoked the person part of a slave to justify violent sexual subjugation claiming the slaves were always consenting to these acts so as to please their masters. The result was that the law “acknowledged the intentionality” of slaves only when it “assumed the form of criminality.” Thus slave personhood came to be identified with criminality and punishment.⁶⁵ These

⁶³ Ibid., 646.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 649.

⁶⁵ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of subjection : Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century america* New York : Oxford University Press, 1997, 80.

equations made paranoia and harm the central focus of sex and sexuality during slavery and for many years in its aftermath.⁶⁶

Within the system of slavery, power was not a simple construct of dominant and dominated. According to Hartman, slaves had a “strength of weakness” in their sexuality that helped to curb total oppression and exercise increments of autonomy via seduction. Through this idea of seduction, Hartman argues that slave women could reverse power and turn it back on their masters. The slave masters were ordinarily strong and represented total domination over their captives, but in their feelings and desires they showed weakness. Therefore, a slave woman summoned by her master for sex would have a choice. She could resist her master, giving him total power to dominate her through physical force or she could comply with him, intimately toying with his desires and emotions. This second option gave slave women the power to subvert domination by their masters and temporarily be the ones in control through their desirability.⁶⁷

However, this idea of seduction, so “central to the very constitution and imagination of the antebellum South,” made the slave woman not merely complicit but guilty. It engraved the relationship between race, gender, and property with a notion of criminality and danger. In Hartman’s words “sexuality was the nexus in which black, female, and chattel were inextricably bound.”⁶⁸ This nexus limited slave subjectivity within is meager terms. Hartman points out that people tend to assume that the gendered order of things did not apply to the black female because she did not have the same privileges as white women. But in reality, both black and white women’s gender was described by “the social and sexual arrangements of the dominant order.” According to Hartman gender is not a universal set of attributes; it is

⁶⁶ Ibid., 81-82.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 88-89.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 87.

contingent on social and economic forces.⁶⁹ As such, gender to becomes “a descriptive for the social and sexual arrangements of the dominant order.” Thus the female slave was “possessed by gender,” in having to measure up to a certain white-dominated gender standard.⁷⁰ These social limitations affected everyone, governing sexual subjectivity with notions of what is supposed to be desirable and what is taboo. The legacy of slavery on American sexuality, particularly in the South, has been the embodiment of criminality, discipline, and fear.

A four-century long practice, the system of American slavery has a legacy that cannot be quickly forgotten even after people have widely seen the evils of this system. It takes generations to understand the fallacy of ideologies and even then the ideologies of their parents are still there with them. The fear around sexuality and race is conditioned so deeply that recognizing this fear is not enough to escape it. The ideologies of slavery continue to shape American social organization, families, feelings, and bodies. I will now jump forward to discuss how the particulars of gender and sexual regulatory politics have played out more recently in the perpetual struggle to distance present ideologies from the ever-powerful institutions of the past.

The twentieth century was a time of rupture through which the politics of fear, anxiety, and policing of sex can be understood. Despite the United States’ brief involvement, World War I was one such moment of rupture. The American family was displaced and gender roles were disrupted as white husbands went off to war. Women forcedly became independent and entered the workforce. Boys became soldiers. Propaganda became invigorated with patriotic spirit. In the aftermath of the war, people struggled to assimilate

⁶⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

their shifted roles, and so rather than completely returning to normalcy the country absorbed changes. Carolyn Dean discusses the “American Sexual Revolution” that took place during the interwar period, calling for a liberation of female sexuality during the “roaring twenties”. But while women were demanding their rights to sexual pleasure and to enter male domains, veterans and right-wing politicians “sought to restore normative gender roles.”⁷¹ Thus, there was a backlash to this period remembered for its sexual freedom and progression. Before the war, social purist movements aimed to stifle prostitution and forms of sexual deviance that threatened gender, race, and class structures, but in the interwar period new campaigns focused on threats to the heterosexual American family.⁷² In some ways, this period of female sexual awakening actually “did not liberate women’s sexuality,” but instead enforced “patriarchal heterosexuality.”⁷³ According to Dean, this ambivalence between sexual liberation and repression created the atmosphere through which the relationship between sexuality and the self became to be defined.⁷⁴

Another important shift was the use of scientific language to talk about sex and to answer ethical questions pertaining to sex and sexuality. Dean attributes this shift to the political action of the neo-Malthusians, followers of “dismal scientist” Thomas Malthus, an economist who emphasized the importance of disease, war, and famine as important agents of population control.⁷⁵ The neo-Malthusians pushed to legalize birth control and inform about eugenic sterilization under campaigns that claimed to improve public hygiene and

⁷¹ Dean, Carolyn J. (Carolyn Janice), 1960-. *Sexuality and modern western culture* New York : Twayne Publishers, c1996, 46.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁷⁵ Dhamee, Yousuf. "Thomas Robert Malthus." *The Victorian Web*. N.p., 9 Aug. 2003. Web. 8 Dec. 2009. <http://www.victorianweb.org/economics/malthus.html>.

preserve racial purity.⁷⁶ Considering sexuality through a scientific lens also reflected a secularization of society, which would seem to reduce some of the regulation, paranoia, and “sex negativity” associated with religious ideology. However, this secularization in a milieu of increasingly rapid information exchange created a jolt reaction and ignited fear of the dissolving of traditional belief systems. The fear of tampering with the established was more powerful perhaps than the ideology behind the traditions themselves. Besides spurring this backlash, secular and scientific approaches to sexuality created regulation of their own. The focus on genes, hormones, and organs only achieved outright normalization and categorization of the human subject. With an emphasis on healthy sexuality (heterosexual, reproductive, and monogamous), psychologists and others began to focus on the “emasculating” and “dirty” vice of pornography.⁷⁷ With this clinical approach, pragmatists sought to bring sexuality into the open, not to liberate it but to control it more effectively.⁷⁸

When discussing the scientific approaches to sexuality it is important to mention the Kinsey Reports published by zoologist Alfred Kinsey in 1948 and 1953 with Indiana University. Kinsey conducted interviews with a wide range of human subjects about their sexual practices and experiences with the goal of conducting a non-partial survey that would describe human sexuality. What he published was highly controversial because it described a sexually diverse population that did not readily conform to normalization or follow prescribed social rules. For example, Kinsey found that twenty percent of married women interviewed reported having had an abortion while married⁷⁹ and that forty-six percent of

⁷⁶ Dean, 47-48.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁹ Joffe, Carole. *American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender, and Race Since the Civil War*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 270.

men reacted sexually to both male and females at some point during their lives.⁸⁰ His findings sparked a great deal of controversy because people linked his data to sexual liberalism, since it portrayed a wide range of sexual possibility.⁸¹ While some celebrated the broader spectrum of sexual possibility and Kinsey's deconstruction of the heterosexual-homosexual binary, others questioned his results and denounced his potentially questionable methodology. These controversies were an expression of the ambivalent sexual atmosphere of liberation then backlash, deregulation and regulation.

Clinical language for sexuality brought out a focus on pornography as a pathologically driven and fetishistic desire. Different attitudes shaped the discussion on pornography. Some scholars including Margaret Mead consider pornography problematic in its anti-social, non-relational nature.⁸² As a post-Marxian thinker who was writing just after Sigmund Freud published his essay *Fetishism*, Mead sees pornography replacing a psychological self-lack. Others however have supported pornography for its therapeutic powers. Morse Peckham argues that pornography "functions as a safety value" that "neutralizes the violence in the sexual emotions that it stimulates."⁸³ Interestingly, Peckham's defense of pornography points out a link that has been made between pornography and violence. Dean has realized that this link is completely illogical and in her historical accounts seeks to pinpoint the way that this link has been cemented in the American mind.⁸⁴ She comes to find this logic tangled up in Cold War paranoia. Between

⁸⁰ "Kinsey Reports." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Dec. 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey_Reports#Sexual_orientation.

⁸¹ Dean, 71.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

1940 and 1960, the number of married women in the workforce doubled and women's sexual liberation was planted. During the Cold War, gender boundaries became more rigid alongside the need to preserve the traditional family in the spirit of producing good, democratic, capitalist Americans.⁸⁵ Consequently, censorship and anti-obscenity legislation increased. In 1957, the US Supreme Court ruled that sexually explicit content can override the First Amendment right to free speech in the case *Roth v. the United States*. Other hearings, including *Millier v. California* loosely distinguished between pornography for "prurient interest" and potentially educative or artistic materials while facilitating unbridled and arbitrary prosecution of offenses that violated these vague terms. Such legislation changed the category of sex offender, making it possible for any average American to be one. Sex offenders were previously conceived of as target groups of "others," like migrants; suddenly sex offenders could be white, and moreover they could be ordinary citizens. Though sex offenders still tended to be conceived of as men, they became a type of person that could be the next-door-neighbor or any number of shoppers at a supermarket. Thus sex offenders, ordinary but no less monstrous, became a pervasive threat; soon, Americans---primarily white, middle-class, and sub-urban dwelling-- were checking around every lamppost and street corner for lurking "pedophiles" and "child molesters" just as they checked for communists under their beds at night.⁸⁶

Attitudes of patriotic purity related the sex offender to the homosexual and both were talked about as if they were contagious diseases that could spread by affecting children's weak, easily shaped minds. Attacks on "boy-lovers" (men who have sexual relations with pubescent boys) were exceptionally harsh because of the fear that youth could become

⁸⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 72-73.

tainted by homosexuality. Because of their youth, boys were presumed to be non-consenting and thus boy-love was equated to rape. Boy-lovers were an object of othering and hate, solidifying the notion that children and adults should not have sex with one another.⁸⁷

Many attacks on gay rights occurred during the 1970s, often operating under the pretense of protecting children. In 1977, Anita Bryant's campaign to repeal a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida pleaded to "Save Our Children." That same year, known for the Great Kiddie Porn Panic, a right-wing drug-addiction treatment facilitator from New York Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber toured the nation to rouse Americans to join her in the fight against pornography. Her campaign to clean up the country began in February of 1977 and received extensive national media coverage. Densen-Gerber and her case full of lewd magazines, allegedly purchased by her daughter were spotlighted by the *Chicago Tribune* and CBS's *60 Minutes*. By May, the issue hit Congress. The Kildee-Murphy Bill proposed that so much as photographing anyone under the age of sixteen naked should be a felony worthy of a fine up to \$50,000 or up to twenty years in prison.⁸⁸ Subsequently, under Ronald Reagan's presidency, a group of Christian conservatives called the "New Right" vied to further increase censorship, link pornography to violence, and to block schools from blurring sex and gender roles by upholding federal funding with the Family Protection Act. The "New Right" was unsuccessful in passing the Act, but their public presence gripped many concerned parents. Importantly, the anti-pornography movements were met by strong support from women and feminists who believed that porn objectified women and could lead to violence against women.⁸⁹ In 1986, the Meese Commission, spearheaded by Attorney General Edwin Meese, published a report on pornography in order to prove that it led to

⁸⁷ Califia, Pat. *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. Pittsburgh : Cleis Press, 1994, p. 51.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁸⁹ Dean, 86-87.

violence and societal degeneracy.⁹⁰ According to Pat Califia's book *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, those who opposed the Commission did not take it seriously enough to stop it: "Its hearings have been kangaroo courts in which porn was tried and found guilty of causing everything from premarital sex to homosexuality to serial murder."⁹¹ The Commission could not prove that pornography caused violence, but got basically what it wanted with a spectacle of violent photographs. The US Justice Department created the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section as a way to bust up the adult-entertainment sector completely unchecked.⁹²

During the 1980s, the AIDS outbreak also had the nation overrun with panic that did not play out well for gay men. Public Baths in San Francisco were promptly shut down in the 80s because they were deemed places of irresponsible sexual license for gay males that catalyzed the spread of the disease. Though many gay people were wary of the negative stigmas the baths attached to homosexuality and joined in advocating closing the baths, the baths were a social structure that offered more than just sexual openness. Destroying this social structure stamped out a cultural niche that offered a support network for gay men and helped them see themselves as part of a community. Closing the baths effectively shut many gay males out of the workforce and closeted and isolated them.⁹³ Perhaps open education and condom distribution would have been a better strategy for addressing AIDS. Unfortunately, all the panic only heightened paranoia and sexual discrimination.

In the contemporary United States, Americans have become neurotic about the potential threat of sexual predation, which has been conflated with pedophilia. The pedophile

⁹⁰ Ibid 83.

⁹¹ Califia, 35.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 32-33.

is an object of fear because he is so starkly different and yet so similar, so naturally integrated and quotidian. He is non-normal. He is sick. His sexual preferences wrongly go against nature. At the same time, the sexual predator is a familiar face who represents the me-and-you people walking around every day, sipping Starbucks lattes and going to work or even helping out with the local little league team. Judith Levine argues that the category of the sexual predator is not so much a real group of people but more a fiction invented in the rampant imaginations of neurotic Americans. The idea of the pedophile generates all sorts of imagery a creep who abducts, rapes, and murders little kids and then eats them for breakfast.⁹⁴ In reality, there are not many of these types out there. Real pedophiles, by the literal notion of the word implying an attraction to children rather than a psychosis, are probably everywhere. In a culture so focused on youth energy and beauty, it is impossible to imagine that there are not loads of people who desire a pubescent girl exposing a little cleavage or who are attracted to the tiny figures and soft skin of children. This desire does not mean that the adults want to harm the children. There is even something perhaps universally inspiring about children. Most people seem to have an impulsive affection for the cuteness of babies that is not construed as harmful.

The terms that define the sexual predator, the pedophile, or the sex offender have blurred the lines between consensual sex acts and violence by establishing very broad definitions of what acts the terms denote.⁹⁵ Sex offender in particular is a term that can be applied to anyone from a serial rapist to a college stalker. Pedophilia gets entangled in the

⁹⁴ Levine, Judith, 1952-. *Harmful to minors : The perils of protecting children from sex* Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, c2002, 22-26.

⁹⁵ Rubin, Gayle. 1984. Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality.*, ed. Carole S. Vance, 267. Boston: Routledge, 269.

web of the worst-case scenario assumptions cast around these loose definitions. By consequence, pedophilia reads as morally wrong, unnatural, and disgusting.

Another important influence is age-of-consent legislation, which confuses the category of the pedophile with arbitrary and inflexible distinctions between adult and child. The age-of-consent laws indicate American's static view of the body's developmental stages. In her book *Sexing the Body* (2000), Anne Fausto-Sterling points out this misconception of human anatomy, instead emphasizing the body's growth within its cultural environment: "We take for granted that the bodies of a new-born, a twenty-year-old, and an eighty-year-old differ. Yet we persist in a static view of anatomic sex. The changes that occur throughout the life cycle all happen as part of a biocultural system in which cells and culture mutually construct each other."⁹⁶ Fausto-Sterling's quote recognizes that American society has no system of *liminality* to account for sexual development and the sexual body. During the twentieth century many cultural anthropologists wrote about the concept of *liminality*, two of the most noted being Van Gennep in 1909 and Victor Turner in 1967. Their concept of *liminality* was that it is important for cultures to have transitional periods and spaces, particularly in ritual, which allowed for individuals to progress easily between different life stages. The transitional places often required that individuals in transition be removed or separated from the culture and then reincorporated as a changed individual.⁹⁷ When it comes to sexuality in contemporary American society, no such structure exists to transition the body from different stages. By thinking about the sexual body as existing in discrete stages without transition, there is a great deal of disease around teaching and discussing sex between

⁹⁶ Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000, p. 242.

⁹⁷ Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithica, New York : Cornell University Press, 1970.

generations. Thus, individuals must deal with abrupt changes in their subjectivity that does not match their actual experienced sexual growth. For example, when a person turns eighteen, she is suddenly allowed to have sexual pleasure, sexual partners, and must go to the clinic to check her reproductive health, but she must take on this new role uncomfortably and shyly rather than embrace the possibilities that lay before her. The result is that sex gets pushed further to the private domain and the sexual subject is kept at a distance from formal, public life.

Another aspect of sexual subjectivity that gets created by the categorization of the sexual predator is identity formation. In his study of ancient Athenian society, David Halperin makes the point that sexual identities like homosexual, heterosexual, sadomasochist, pedophile, etc have not always existed in Western society. According to Halperin, in ancient Athens, sex acts were expressions of existing power relations in society but they were not linked to psychic identity or a human self-essence.⁹⁸ Today, the opposite is the case; sex acts determine one's identity, which in turn affects the way that society constructs its power relations. This categorization has to have a distinctly regulatory effect on human beings. By constantly labeling, grouping, and describing individuals according to their sex acts, society creates rules and expectations that go along with the constructed categories.

In the next chapter, I will begin to discuss the ways in which sexual identity categories are formed and held in place within American society and the complex questions that arise when we examine these ideological systems. These topics are important because the repression of sexual desire, categorization of identity, obsessive bodily scrutiny, and constant fear is harmful to society. Normalizing identity categories becomes an issue of

⁹⁸ Halperin, David M. "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory* 28.3, October 1989.

human kindness, because these categories can hurt people. They hurt not only people who deviate from the social norms, but they hurt everyone limiting us from fulfilling our full creative potential as humans. These categories are superficial and so it is important to remove them from our minds and bodies, examine them, and determine if they are more beneficial or harmful to us. Ideological concepts of gender and sexuality determine structural policy and thus it is important to be able to see how these ideologies are affecting our thinking in order to do the least amount of harm in the policies we construct.

Chapter 2

Those Tricky, Sticky Words: Language, Categories, and Regulation

I. Face-to-Face

“Please enjoy the music while your party is reached.” I waited nervously for Mary K. Mart to answer her phone. His phone? Do I call him/her Mary? My heart was pumping to the rhythm of Lady Gaga’s catchy pop song Paparazzi. “I’m your biggest fan, I’ll follow you until you love me, Papa – Papa – Paparazzi – hello?” I was shocked by the masculine voice on the other end. Though I’d already seen Mary K. Mart host Drag Bingo twice, I’d never just heard her voice in normal conversation without the visual image of her drag character to show me she was a woman. Instant confusion.

On a Tuesday afternoon a week or two later, I drove to meet Mary at her house in Raleigh, near the Farmer’s Market. I followed her directions, found the house and knocked on the front door. A forty-two year old man appeared before me. In real life, Mary was close to bald, making her head about half the size that I had last seen it. She was wearing a tee-shirt and looked quite comfortable at home. I had to look up because she was much bigger than me, but her face was soft and welcoming. I introduced myself and we shook hands. “I’m Mary, or Randy,” she laughed. She offered me something to drink and I accepted a glass of water. She put her dogs in another room behind a baby gate, but they continued to bark loudly at the excitement, so we decided to go sit on the front porch. It was early October, so it was still bright out and a comfortable warm temperature. Before we started our interview, Mary telephoned her neighbor Rodessa Rhodehard, also known as Rodney, another Bingo Verifying Diva (BVD), and told her/him to come over too.

One of the first things I asked was what I should call her. She told me that “Mary” was fine, that “most people know me as Mary” and that “we tend to use the word ‘she’ as basic slang for the gay community.” The use of “she” and “he” was very confusing we both agreed. Mary told me that she even liked to use the term “it” sometimes. “Here it comes!” she boomed pointing at Rodessa. They both laughed and explained that this use of “it” was not derogatory. Instead “it” was a funny way to critique the insufficiency of the English language. I realized that Mary’s playful humor was what was so appealing about her as a drag queen hostess at Drag Bingo. Like most of the joking banter between Mary and John Paul onstage at Drag Bingo, this humor was a device that made confusing and sensitive topics more approachable.

Though “she” as a term for “gay” men was generally unobtrusive in her circles, there were exceptional times when pronoun choice could be an extremely sensitive issue. Mary told me of one friend, who fell into both the “female-to-male” and “gay male” categories. This friend hated being referred to as “she,” despite the elusive conditions of his gender identity. In many ways, being or becoming transgender is much more serious than performing drag. Transgenderism is a commitment. It requires one to alter the body in lasting ways. It is not merely a new decoration and presentation of the body, but a physical incorporation of change in the body. It is a redefining of the self. In comparison, drag is a temporary concept. It’s the dress, the make-up, and the wonder bra and it all comes off at the end of the night.

It seemed that for Mary’s friend, the English language needed to be more flexible to incorporate those people who do not fall strictly into the “he” and “she” groups. Yet, for many people who identify as transgender “he” *would* be the appropriate word because

anything in between “he” and “she” would undermine that desired male gender identity. Perhaps Mary’s friend would be equally offended to be called anything less than “he.” Even if another term accurately described his female-to-gay-male-ness, the term would undermine his masculinity and highlight his separateness from quote “-biological” males.

The topic of gendered language is important because gender identity is not an exclusively internal affair but it is based on an interaction between the individual and “its” cultural environment. In other words, it is not enough for individuals to understand their own inner desires and habits, but it is important to be able to express these internal psychic phenomena and to have others understand them. It is extremely important to be able to claim an identity and to be marked by a label that best fits with these internal processes. A pioneer of the anthropology of drag Esther Newton made a distinction between one’s outer appearance and inner essence. She argues that drag is a form of “oppositional play” between “appearance” and “reality” or “essence.”⁹⁹ She describes this play as an “inversion” of two main oppositions, the outside-inside and masculine-feminine oppositions.¹⁰⁰ By inverting gender, drag queens are able to show that sex roles can be achieved, regardless of genitals.¹⁰¹

This separation of the inner and the outer has come to define the American concept of gender, which concentrates on the idea that gender is a part of your internal self, separate from your anatomical sex. As a result, deviance from gender norms is generally conceptualized as a discrepancy between one’s inner gendered self and one’s physical anatomy. Transgenderism is the epitome of this concept. In movies and television specials, we are constantly being told a typical saga of the woman trapped in a man’s body and vice

⁹⁹ Newton, Esther. *Margaret mead made me gay [electronic resource]* : *Personal essays, public ideas*, ed. Inc ebraryDurham, NC : Duke University Press, 2000, Full text in: ebrary, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 21.

versa. Mary K. Mart told me that there was a significant distinction between transgender and drag, that drag is merely for entertainment and lighthearted in nature whereas transgenderism “is an actual lifestyle – a psychological thing about knowing you’re not in the right body.” Being transgender means there is a disconnect between the your anatomy and what sex or gender you feel you are inside and desire to be on the outside. As Mary pointed out, transgenderism is more of a serious subject than drag because drag is understood as a temporary inversion of gender that has nothing to do with one’s “true” identity. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) calls the discrepancy between “one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender” by the daunting term “Gender Identity Disorder,” a lifelong condition. According to the proposed fifth volume of the APA’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, this “disorder” has six symptoms:

1. a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics
2. a strong desire to be rid of one’s primary and/or secondary sex characteristics because of a marked incongruence with one’s experienced/expressed gender
3. a strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender
4. a strong desire to be of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender)
5. a strong desire to be treated as the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender)
6. a strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender)¹⁰²

Science is all about making the physical, observable world fit under a “normal” bell curve. The DSM’s job is to describe human psychology in this same scientific manner, clearly marking out which behaviors and desires are “normal” and which clearly cross the line. This

¹⁰² Kupfer, David J., (Task Force Chair), et. al. Proposed revisions - APA DSM-5. in American Psychiatric Association [database online]. Arlington, VA, 2010 [cited March 3 2010]. Available from <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=193>.

process helps maintain a certain cultural order. Of courses, the DSM alone is not responsible for preserving what types of behavior are socially acceptable and thus constraining the way gender is expressed. The DSM is simply one example of society's regulatory regimes, which are present at most fundamental levels of society such as labor, education, and the family. The DSM is simply a written manifestation of the social regulation and social reproduction that are constantly taking place within American society.

Social regulation relies upon the general population's fears that deviance leads to harm. When I interviewed Jan Muller, an employee of the Alliance of AIDS Services and a social activist who identifies proudly as a lesbian, she told me a story about this fear. She was out with a friend and the two of them saw "a whole gaggle of gender queer." The nearby group was dressed androgynously and most had dyed their hair bold colors like green and purple. Jan told me that her friend was disconcerted because she could not identify the gender of any of them! But Jan, annoyed at her friend's unwarranted panic, responded by saying "what do you care if they're male or female *or not?*"¹⁰³ Anxiety over the need to be able to identify people into certain categories is the reason why the DSM exists. The DSM outlines what is abnormal in order to separate that behavior as problematic, as detrimental to the individual because of the distress it causes the individual, and as detrimental to society through its corrupting affect. This makes the behavior less disruptive to the "normal" social order because it is defined as an exception, an outlier, something that is okay to pity and look down upon. When we read the DSM's account of "Gender Identity Disorder," we are compelled to feel awful for those people who are so distressed about their secondary sex characteristics.

¹⁰³ Jan Muller, formal interview, October 20, 2009.

The idea of normalcy is premised on the fact that social behavior always fits under a “normal” curve. Because American society so strongly honors the scientific approach, behavior tends to conform to the norms that science finds. But it is important to understand that bell curves are a manipulation of statistical data used to impose certain logic on observed findings. Might I suggest that not all human behavior should be understood through the lens of normal and abnormal groups? Could behavior ever be *anormal*? When the skeleton of the DSM is removed, transgenderism looks nothing more than a lack of conformity to gender norms. In no way do I intend to undermine the real difficulties that transgender individuals face in a bipolar gender society. I want to make it clear that only through this social diagnosis --the labeling of an identity *problem*-- can the simple desire to not conform become an intense process that involves the reordering of an individual’s sense of “who am I?”

In his book *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser emphasizes the importance of personal narratives of transformations for individuals who would be described as transgender or transsexual, having undertaken procedures to convert from one gender to another. Prosser describes the process of *transforming* from one gender to another as central to the identity of the transgender individual. He writes: “Narrative is also a kind of second skin: the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that his body may be ‘read.’”¹⁰⁴ The narrative is so important because to become another gender requires a metamorphosis. According to Prosser, one cannot simply pass between genders. Changing gender is not a sudden event. It is an intense process of physical and psychic change that requires a reorganization of the self in society. By this definition, an individual’s essential

¹⁰⁴ Prosser, Jay. *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality* New York : Columbia University Press, c1998, 101.

understanding of himself is dependent on the way he is “read” by others. In other words, one cannot have an identity without others to identify him.

As Prosser’s transformation narratives indicate, the American view of gender identity is that identity is a fixed constant that develops in infancy and early childhood and remains the same throughout a lifetime. If you are ever confused about your gender, something must have gone terribly wrong developmentally! This inflexibility of gender identity is exacerbated by the limited few possibilities of gender categories. People must fit primarily into two specific groups, male and female, and anything in between is confusing and indescribable. While society restricts outward expressions to a few confined roles, the inner human psyche is a whirlpool of different desires and attractions, what Sigmund Freud calls “polymorphous perversity.” Freud describes these “general and fundamental human characteristics” as varied erotic excitement that occurs naturally in infants, unsuppressed by shame, disgust, or morality. The infant can be openly perverse because he or she is unaware of social rules, but when he or she grows up that perversity will not disappear, but it will dwell in his subconscious.¹⁰⁵ With this suppression of desire, it is easy to make the connection to what Freud considers the fulcrum of human psychology: conflict between internal desire and outward social role. Freud helps us see that the strict limitations of hetero-normative gender cannot possibly account for the diversity of internal sexual and gender desire.

Another important point about this inner/outer distinction is the way that actions and expressions are equated with *being*. In American society, dressing in women’s clothes, desiring and having sexual relations with men, and using a high-pitched tone of voice with

¹⁰⁵ Freud, Sigmund, 1856-1939. *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*. Drei abhandlungen zur sexualtheorie. english., ed. James Strachey New York : Basic Books [1963, c1962], 57.

certain inflections indicate that a person *is a woman*. All people of x gender do y and everyone who does y is x gender. There is little room for interpretation. This logical fallacy composes a discourse of gender performativity that marks the human subject.

Launching from Esther Newton's study of drag and gender identity, Judith Butler has written extensively about the everyday performance of gender as a form of social regulation. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler cites Newton's claim that drag is an inversion of gender:

At it's most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says [Newton's curious personification] "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' (the body) is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' (my body, my gender) is masculine but my essence 'inside' (myself) is feminine."¹⁰⁶

In this quote, Newton's personification of drag is a way to show the usefulness of drag as a way to speak to society. According to Newton, drag shows its audience that an individual's inner and outer gendered selves can be at odds. Butler disagrees with Newton as to what drag shows, arguing that these double inversions contradict each other and thus "displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity." Rather than highlighting the separation of these inner and outer psychic realms, drag "mocks" the everyday performance of gender and undermines the model of "a true gender identity." Butler believes that drag shows a separation, not between "inner" and "outer" genders, but a separation between the anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. By her argument, the independence of these three categories weakens the commonly held concept of a single entity of physical and psychic truth. Thus, Butler can make her primary claim that "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself." With the

¹⁰⁶ Newton in Butler. *Gender trouble* 137.

idea that gender is imitation, we can see that gender is based on social norms that only have meaning within a cultural context. This view points to the arbitrariness through which certain expressions of gender receive precedence over others as being “normal.” Therefore, when the bipolar system of gender is removed from its cultural fabric, it is no longer “natural and necessary.”¹⁰⁷

In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler details her argument of the everyday performance of gender, drawing more on Michel Foucault’s concept of regulatory social discourse. She argues that gender identities are not factitious; they are produced. This production of gender happens in two related ways. First, social regulatory regimes enforce certain constraints for gender identities by constantly policing the individual’s expressions of gender within a culture. Second, there exists a discourse between a subject and what that subject signifies for others. For example, when Butler says that she is a lesbian, there is already a certain set of assumptions that go with “lesbian” that people perceive to be true. Similarly, dress, gesture, posture, and speech all indicate certain assumptions that create and reify a person’s gender identity. With this foundation, Butler’s main point is that *all gender is drag* in that it is not a psychic reality but a performance that mimics the repetition of certain forms of expression.¹⁰⁸ Butler concludes that:

If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of system sex come to have intelligibility at all. It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the effects of this compulsory performance, effects which are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins, disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex. How then to expose the causal lines as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications, and to engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as

¹⁰⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble : Feminism and the subversion of identity* New York : Routledge, c1999, 137-138.

¹⁰⁸ Butler, Judith. 1991. Imitation and gender insubordination. In *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York: Routledge 13-29.

nothing other than the effects of *drag*, whose subversive possibilities ought to be played and replayed to make the “sex” of gender into a site of insistent political play?¹⁰⁹

In theory, drag is the perfect display of Butler’s gender model because it is such an exaggerated expression of polarized gender performance. “We know we are two very big men in dresses. We’re not trying to be Brittany Spears,” Rhodessa told me flatly. Later she said that, “People need to understand, what we do is a character.” She explained that when people watch television, they tend to think that the characters truly exist, but they do not; drag is the same way. Rodessa Rhodehard was a fictive character, just temporary, for entertainment. So why were the three of us all still calling this person sitting before me Rhodessa? I asked her about her first experience in drag. It was the early nineties, she claimed, Halloween. She was at work in the town of Lexington, North Carolina and had planned to meet her friends at a bar. Rather spontaneously, she went out and bought a pair of shoes at a shoe store from a lady she talked to everyday as if everything was completely normal. She obtained a black dress with a see through mesh across the top and a cheap Dolly Parton wig. A friend helped out with make-up. (“*It was born!*” Mary chimed in.) Rodessa continued, at the bar she had joined in the festivities with her friends but none of them had a clue who she (he) was. “They were all like ‘who the hell is this drag queen?’ and I said ‘you don’t know who I am!’” Rodessa had shocked her friends with what Esther Newton would call an “illusion” and an “inversion”. Clothes and make-up were able to transform a fully-grown man (named Rodney) into a completely new creature: a drag queen who would eventually develop into the fabulous Rodessa Rhodehard. Compared to what she does now at Drag Bingo each month, her Halloween debut could hardly be called a performance. Her first

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 29.

time in drag was based largely on a costume, but with years of practice she has incorporated more gesture and speech, into her portrayal of womanhood.

Incorporated is exactly the word I mean-- *to take into the body*. Mary and Rhodessa were telling me that what they did was simply a performance, a role that they could slip on and off. I had my doubts. After years of dressing up in drag, they were slowly appropriating new forms of gesture and speech into their vocabulary *and* into their bodies. Each time they have dressed in drag they have experienced a different type of subjectivity than they would in men's clothing. And acting out the part of "woman," they have encoded new forms of gesture and speech into their memories. The different ways of expressing their female selves would have slowly been naturalized in their bodies. Though they were telling me that that character "Mary" or "Rodessa" did not exist offstage, I felt that the jokes, the laughter, the gestures were not as easily peeled away as the beehive wigs. I was sitting there with the two of them and I knew that Mary K. Mart lived within Randy and Rodessa lived within Rodney. These men had produced those female characters. Even without wigs, shoes, fake breasts, or make-up to decorate their bodies, there were times when I could still see the female characters showing through. I am not claiming that male Randy is equivalent to female Mary, but that Randy and Mary are both parts of the same human being. We all have different roles for different situations that we perform everyday. But for each of us, those many performed roles still come from within one body and mind. Butler argues that everything about gender is a fictitious character, a performance, but her argument that performance, identity, and anatomical sex are all exclusive entities is flawed.

These three categories are inexorably connected to one another. The drag character Mary's identity is a part of the male Randy's identity. Performance is not merely an outward expression but something that is enacted within the mind and the body. Internal psychic desires influence a person's actions (or performance). At



Mary and John Paul, courtesy of <http://www.dragbingo.com/>

some level, the physical body (the hormones, the genitalia, the height and weight of the body, the presence or lack of hair) influences a person's desires, which are formed and experienced differently depending on one's appearance (and identity) within a social system. Actions, desires, and the body may not be one and the same and as Butler would agree they should not be forced into mutually exclusive hetero-normative camps that do not permit deviance. A person's actions, desires, and body can both contradict and reinforce one another. Nonetheless, these categories can never be fully disentangled.

In her essay *Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias*, Bidy Martin responds to Butler and other feminist and queer theorists, by questioning the implications of the theory that all gender is drag. Butler's theory supports the idea of that everyone is or should be "queer", fundamentally neither male nor female and that concepts of sexuality should not be based on heterosexual/homosexual opposition. Queer theory, she argues creates a separation between the mind and the body. Martin reminds us that such a separation does not truly exist but that in fact there is a complex relationship between the mind and body. In addition, Martin finds this theoretical separation dangerous and enumerates its negative consequences. She says that the separation renders the body irrelevant, makes the

complex relations between the body and the psyche disappear, and forces people to become their social or political identity.¹¹⁰

So society and politics, not the individual, are determining gender identity. How constraining for such an individualistic society! You simply cannot be anything but a few limited categories? In truth categories are highly constraining, but Judith Butler's theory does not account for real desires that do align with the bipolar gender. Martin questions what happens with this type of theory to people who actually want to have a core identity as "man" or "woman" that conforms to the norms. Is it wrong to want to be essentially female or male? Is it not okay for a lesbian to be a "femme" lesbian, who wears make-up and conforms to ideas of what a "normal" woman is? What are the implications of queer theory for people who are transgender or transsexual, who actually want to be one gender (not a queer in-between) and they want to have their body reflect that? Queer theory tells these individuals that they are wrong for wanting to conform to that gender ideal, or even that the gender they feel they are does not exist. The theory does not allow for these people to have the identity that they seek and desire.¹¹¹

Perhaps a better way to understand gender is that it can be an intangible act of self-creation. "In Novel Conditions: The Cross-dressing Psychiatrist" by Allucquère Rosanne Stone tells the story of a man who created a virtual identity for himself as a woman on the Internet. The man was a psychiatrist, named Sanford Lewin, who one day in an online chat forum had a conversation with a woman who had perceived him as a woman too. Lewin was inspired by the emotional depth, volume of sharing, and vulnerability of the woman-to-woman interaction and was compelled to learn more about what it was like to interact with

¹¹⁰ Martin, Bidy. Sexualities without genders and other queer utopias. *Diacritics* 24, (23) (Summer-Fall 1994): 104.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

people as a woman. So he created a made-up identity for himself as a woman, Julie Graham. Julie had a distinct history and personality, that was very different from Lewin's personality as a man. She was quite charismatic and made a lot of online friends. Eventually, Lewin's story began to unravel and so Julie introduced to the online chatters her good friend, Lewin, the real Lewin as a man. But Lewin as a man was unable to win over people as Julie had and never made friends. Eventually, it came out that Lewin was a man who had created the virtual identity for Julie. People were outraged by the deception but most mourned the virtual death of a close friend. Nevertheless, a few realized that "whether he's Julie or Sanford, there's an inner person that must have been there all along."¹¹²

I found this article quite informative. It tells us that gender identity is something that as humans we can create for ourselves. It also tells us that gender identity is fortified through social interaction, that it is part of a recursive process. This point allows us to conclude that gender can be virtual, much like the chat room space, allowing us to see it as a socially imagined concept that is not held by tangible bodies. Gender is a psychic reality both for the self and for the society in which the self exists. The Internet as a virtual space has enabled people to create new identities or fantasies for themselves that are completely independent of their physical, biological bodies. As Stone concludes, "many of the pre-net assumptions about the nature of identity had quietly vanished."

Lewin discovered that the act of cross-dressing enables people to experience what it is like to have another gender identity than usual. Even physical non-virtual cross-dressing can be an act of engaging a fantasy, a way to live out the undeveloped parts of the self. The

¹¹² Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. 1995. In novel conditions: The cross dressing psychiatrist In *The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age* , 65. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

difference is that with physical cross-dressing, the new experience is lived in the body as well as in the imagination.

II. The Meaning of Words

Gay, lesbian, straight, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, sexual, transgender, transsexual, trans man, trans woman, female-to-male (ftm), male-to-female (mtf), bio-male, bio-female, transvestite, tranny, hermaphrodite, true hermaphrodite, intersexed person (IS), person with intersexed conditions, 2-spirit, Berdache, third gender, LGBT(Q)(I), questioning, queer, Queer Theory, queering, queen, drag queen, drag, drag king, Bingo Verifying Diva (BVD), performance, ball, cross dresser, metrosexual, flamboyant, faery, butch lesbian, lipstick lesbian, dyke, male, female, husband, wife, mother, father, sister, brother, man, *woman*, *human*, he, she, [s]he, he/she, it, masculine, feminine, androgynous, ambiguous gender, ambiguous genitalia, unisex, sex change, sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), passing, identified as x, presenting as y, ABCDEFG.

Gender, sex, sexuality, sexual orientation. *What are these concepts?* Through my research, I have found that these four words are inexorably interconnected; yet they are all completely elusive. They are based on conditions in the body, on the body, in the mind, and in the mind of our culture. In contemporary US society, the language we use to describe these different states is highly important to the formation of our identities. I had originally thought that I would start this section by defining the vocabulary that I found important for a clear discussion of the gender/sex/sexuality/sexual orientation complex. I started to make a list of the important terms, but as the list grew and grew I found it more and more difficult to distinguish them as independent ideas. The list is full of buzzwords that I use throughout my paper as I meander through specific yet entwined concepts. They are confusing, to say the

least. They are often vague, yet sometimes over-defined. The more I try to unravel these meanings the more I struggle for words.

I simply cannot describe the history and various meanings of all of these words, because that would be another paper by itself! However, in this paper, I frequently use some of these terms casually and so I would like to clarify what I mean when I use those. Firstly, the word “queer” has had negative connotations but is becoming a more accepted term today. I use “queer” in two senses. I use “queer” as a noun to describe gender that does not fall neatly in the polarized male/female system. I also use “queer” as a verb to talk about a play with social norms, gender related or otherwise. Secondly, I use “transgender” to speak about the concept of feeling trapped in the wrong body (male or female) and making a transition to correct this issue. Technically, “transgendered” individuals have been described by the changes they cause to their body through dress and hormone therapy. “Transexual” individuals have taken the change a step further and undergone corrective genital surgery. When I speak about the group at large that incorporates individuals described by many of the above terms, I use “non-normative” or “non-heteronormative.” “Non-normative gender” is meant to describe anyone who does not fit perfectly into the categories of male and female according to American society. “Non-heteronormative” is everyone except those who identify as exclusively heterosexual and completely male or female. Lastly, I use the term “LGBT” (gay, lesbian, bisexual, & transgender... sometimes Q is added for queer or questioning, or I for intersex) when I am describing the *community* of non-heteronormative people. I understand the limitations of these four (or five or six) letters. However, when speaking generally about the community, the most visible, and active are often the L’s the

G's the B's and the T's. Unfortunately, a lot of lumping together of distinct terms must occur, but that is a problem that the American vocabulary has created.

I am not the only one perplexed by this difficult nomenclature. My research participants also struggled to define the terms they used. I constantly found contradictions between the language of one interviewee and another, or between an interviewee's language and something I would read. I even found my interviewees to define something with one term and then contradict themselves a few minutes later.

I have found that the language for describing gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation is inadequate on a number of levels. The number of words to describe conditions of gender, sexuality, etc is extremely limited, and most of the existing words are not common vernacular. Language is often confusing; yet, this language holds a great deal of power over America's social structures and concepts of gender, sexulaity, etc.

What is this language doing within American culture? First, language creates identity categories, which are limited as a result of the lack of adequate words. Likewise the lack of general public understanding of the words, or an agreed understanding of what they mean, further restricts the formation of identity to a limited number of possibilities. Second, terms are constantly being re-defined and replacing one another for the sake of changing ideas about political correctness. This instability of definition and connotation creates both confusion and anxiety about non-normative gender, sex, etc. Third, the simultaneous lack and overabundance of language contributes to the *illusion* of the heterosexual, male/female norm and the invisibility of everything that falls outside of this norm.

. . .

I had known about *Pam's House Blend*¹¹³ for several months and thought of it as a part of the concealed non-heteronormative space of Durham and the US nation. As I drafted Chapter 1, I kept checking this blog occasionally, hoping I could somehow use it to create a description of Durham's recent history through the lens of the LGBT and non-gender/sexual normative community. I knew the website was ethnographically rich, but one day I pulled up the site and realized I'd found a gold mine. The most recent article, written by Autumn Sandeen, was a response to a news comedy segment on National Public Radio's (NPR) show *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*. The cast had been making fun of Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter, who had recently made derogatory comments about letting "transgenders" and "hermaphrodites" into the military in accordance with President Obama's plan to repeal the US military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy towards admitting people who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Hunter said, "If you're going to let anybody in, no matter what preference – what sexual preference – they have, that means the military is going to probably let everybody in. It's going to be like civilian life." Autumn's post contained a short transcript of the various comedians from *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me* chiming in to mock the political banter:

[After quoting Hunter] "He said that. He was worried about the hermaphrodites. He doesn't understand that hermaphrodites would be a tactical asset. They can pursue enemies into both men's and women's restrooms."

"That's true. Yeah."

"Then maybe..."

"The Taliban would have no place to hide."

¹¹³ Sandeen, Autumn. *Wait, wait, please do tell us, NPR, what is so funny about intersexed people?* . Pam's house blend., <http://www.pamshouseblend.com/diary/15148/wait-wait-please-do-tell-us-npr-what-is-so-funny-about->

“I don’t think we have any laws on the books preventing hermaphrodites from serving in our military, do we?”

“Well... he’s afraid that they will figure that out.”

“They fall under the *Don’t Ask Can’t Tell* policy.”

[Laughs]

Autumn was highly offended by the segment. She -- I believe Autumn to be a she, and for the lack of a gender neutral singular pronoun I will use the term she to refer to Autumn -- she found it appropriate to mock the Republican Congressman but thought that the repetition of the word “hermaphrodites”, an outdated and less accepted term to describe “intersex people,” was offensive. She also hated the joke about both men and women’s restrooms, what she referred to as the Bathroom Meme (“that transsexual women and transgender people presenting as women are potential bathroom predators”), feeling that it was a cheap shot at a vulnerable group. Her article spurred an entire debate about the use of appropriate vocabulary to describe certain biological and non-biological conditions related to sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Autumn is one of Pam Spaulding’s seven staff writers, or “baristas” as they are called to keep with the coffeehouse theme. As a “barista,” Autumn is a fairly trusted source for bloggers who visit the site, well-versed in the current literature, politics, and events relating to discrimination against sexual minorities and non-normative gender. Autumn’s article gives her account for why the word hermaphrodite is offensive, in line with Intersex Society North America’s (ISNA) guidelines. She claims hermaphrodite is highly *stigmatizing* on top of being an *inaccurate* description for people with (subjectively) ambiguous physiological conditions that make them difficult to classify as male or female. She adds that some people have reclaimed the term as a source of identity pride, as has happened with “queer” and

“dyke,” but that it is “best generally avoided, since the political subtlety is lost on a lot of people.” The preferred term *Intersex* is a blanket term to describe individuals with some combination of both male and female anatomy or physiology, which includes over 170 different conditions.¹¹⁴

Below Autumn’s article there were nineteen different comments, most several paragraphs long, that expressed a variety of opinions about language use and politically correctness. While many bloggers shared Autumn’s outrage at the offensive language, several others admitted that they were unaware that “hermaphrodite” was now an offensive, outdated term. “I don’t get it why is the term ‘hermaphrodite’ derogatory?” one said, “I’m yet another ignorant ‘thought I was fluent with appropriate sexual terminology’ person who thought that term was perfectly neutral... like a scientific term.” One person offered, “Why is the word “negro” wrong?” Another wrote “In other cases in the animal kingdom... a true Hermaphrodite is able to propagate with themselves.” Below that someone commented:

Why don’t you let actual intersexed people decide if they are offended? As someone who was actually born a “true hermaphrodite” (tetrametic chimera) I find telling others based on some organization’s say so, known for denying people like me even existed, highly problematic...ISNA is widely viewed in intersexed circles as a fraud and associated with such delightful people as “experts” as Mike Bailey defender Alice Dreger, known for her promotion of hateful alternative terminology almost all legitimate intersexed organizations oppose bitterly. Cheryl Chase [leader of ISNA] has had more identities than there are intersexed conditions and has been exposed as a fraud over and over.¹¹⁵

Autumn responded to this particular riled-up intersex blogger, with a series of publications and sources backing her use of intersex over hermaphrodite. Citing *Times Lives* quoting Kofanda of *Intersex Africa*, a website *Intersex Initiative Portland*, *The Daily Beast*, Curtis Hinkle of OII’s *Ten Misconceptions about Intersex*, and *AOLHealth*, Autumn makes political claims based on scientific evidence. She primes us with why the negative connotations of

¹¹⁴ Gina9223, Pam’s House Blend.

“hermaphrodite” are based on scientific denotations: “In biology, ‘hermaphrodite means an organism that has both ‘male’ and ‘female’ sets of reproductive organs (like snails and earthworms)” she cites from *Intersex Initiative Portland*. Then Autumn cites an article referring to Thea Hillman who has fought the label hermaphrodite, “She was... diagnosed with a genetic condition, Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), which is a defect that prevents the body from producing the hormone cortisone. It interferes with development in both males and females and can affect normal growth of the genitals. It’s hormonal in nature, and different, but falls under the intersex category and she says she is often labeled hermaphrodite.” This turn to science sanctions Autumn’s point with legitimacy and officialdom.

Neutral. Scientific. It is important to recognize the importance that Americans assign to science and how much we let it determine our lives, *ourselves*. Science has acquired a great deal of authority over culture. It is placed on a pedestal that we call objectivity. As humans our perceptions and decisions are flawed, so we turn to Father Science to be our judge. Science is linked to progressivism. We believe science to be our access to knowledge and truth. But science is merely one perspective, one version of The Truth (whatever that is). The authority of science determines the language we find appropriate, as well as the way we understand our bodies, our social roles, and our identities. Nevertheless, scientific methodologies can be limited by cultural contexts. For example, people who wish to have “sexual reassignment surgery,” or to use the most recent politically correct term “gender confirmation surgery,” often need a DSM diagnosis in order to obtain that surgery through insurance coverage. This example is a pertinent reminder of the influence that our cultural beliefs and demands have upon what science can actually discover. What’s more, the

language itself “sexual reassignment” or “gender confirmation surgery” or even the diagnostic “gender identity disorder” carries forth a sense of validation of a person’s internal states. Particularly when it comes to psychiatric medicine, scientific language in this way creates identities. About a year ago in the spring of 2008, I interviewed a man for another writing project completely unrelated to this thesis. At the beginning of our second interview, I asked him to describe his personality to me. He paused for a moment before telling me straightforwardly, “I am obsessive-compulsive. I am also bipolar.”¹¹⁶ I remember this exchange so boldly because his response had surprised me. I *am* obsessive compulsive. I *am* bipolar. He was expressing more than just his personality. His identity, in fact, was defined by textbook psychological disorders. When I think about his response in the context of gender and sexual identity, I cannot but think how much stronger the pull of scientific vocabulary must be for generating identities, when sex and gender are already such necessary components of social identity in American culture.

Anne Fausto-Sterling’s book *Sexing the Body* delves into the question of biology’s role in determining gender. Through a history of hormones, sex assignments, experiments, and scientific debates, Fausto-Sterling analyzes the power that the scientific method holds over the politics of the body and what kind of person that body can and cannot be. In a chapter called “Sexing the Brain,” Fausto Sterling looks at the hotly debated area of the brain the corpus callosum (the CC).¹¹⁷ She describes the way researchers have attempted to isolate this brain area, measure it, and perform statistical metanalysis on the data they collect, in order to define normal sex and gender differences as something that is located in the brain. Fausto-Sterling shows that the different results of these scientific studies have been highly

¹¹⁶ Personal communication, Spring 2009.

¹¹⁷ Not to be confused with Raleigh’s drag and LGBT nightclub the Capital Coral (the CC), though both are sites where gender is quite mysterious!

diverse and will probably never be able to articulate sex or gender differences as something based exclusively on “nature” or “biology”.

Can we ever know whether there is a gender difference in the corpus callosum? Well it depends on what we mean by *knowing*. The corpus callosum is a highly variable bit of anatomy. Scientists go to great lengths to fix it in place for laboratory observation, but despite their best efforts it won't hold still...The researchers continue to probe the corpus callosum in search of definitive gender difference speaks to how entrenched their expectations about biological differences remain. As with intersexuality, however, I would argue that the real excitement of studies of the corpus callosum lies in what we can learn about the vastness of human variation and the ways in which the brain develops as part of a social system.¹¹⁸

Fausto-Sterling points out that what science claims as truth is highly influenced by cultural and political ideologies. The corpus callosum is completely tangled with these ideologies: “cognition, homosexuality, environment, education, social and political power, moral and religious beliefs.”¹¹⁹ This acknowledgement helps her form the basis of her argument in a later chapter that the body's biological mechanisms are inseparable from human social development and as such sex and gender develop within the body's connection to complex social environments.¹²⁰ The importance of Fausto-Sterling's argument is its recognition of the way science cements these cultural ideologies. For instance, she describes gynecologist William Bell's influential theory that femininity is based on internal secretions rather than visible sex organs.¹²¹ Bell's theory makes an interesting distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of sex and gender on and within the body. It draws a distinction between what is outside the body (visible anatomy) and what is inside (feelings). The visibility of anatomy as male or female is employed within science to justify invisible sex and gender, that which is linked with identity, essence, and soul. This visibility mostly lives outside the body, within society, and it is more easily disguised and performed. Invisibility on the other

¹¹⁸ Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the body : Gender politics and the construction of sexuality* New York, NY : Basic Books, c2000, 143-145.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 245-246.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

hand is internal and personal. It marks the inner reality of the self that cannot be escaped. By calling upon microscopic hormones, Bell bridges the gap between the invisible and visible, the natural and spiritual. His theory hardens the cultural ideal of biologically determined gender by exposing gender identity under a microscope and dispersing any concept of a gender as a socially imagined entity.

Fausto-Sterling comments that the “chemical sexing of the body reveal[s] a more complex relationship between scientific and social knowledge,” that “reading gender into and from bodies is a more complex matter than merely allowing the body to speak the truth.”¹²² This argument indicates the role of science (as an institution of culture) in gender and sexual identity formation. Given the power assigned to scientific discourse, findings about hormones can undermine people’s ability to be whatever they want outwardly or internally, restricting them instead to consigned gender categories. The body can be changed, concealed, or redecorated externally, but inside is where we must read “the truth.” This “truth” is a reality of held social beliefs that get reified through scientific data, empiricism, and white lab coats. Father Science merely confirms social ideas of what is male and what is female and provides people with tangible tools to claim identities for themselves that reflect a two-gender social orientation.

What is the role of scientific language categorization in incorporating new concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality? What is this mix of science and politics really doing with its creation of the “intersex” category? Let’s look at a particularly riveting blog comment by Gina9223.

I’m Intersexed (a poly-morphic chimera) and Transgendered (I’m complicated) as well (all the books and guidelines saying that I can’t be both are wrong) and the language used is a

¹²² Ibid.,169.

challenge at times even for me...I learned a long time ago that all the guide lines and rules are nice for someone, but honestly I don't expect a person who has not ever encountered an Intersexed person to know anything about the subject matter. When I do have a friend that I'm comfortable with... I end up saying "It's kind of like hermaphroditism" so they understand what I'm saying. All of the various 'guide books' are just that, guides and they only work if someone has read them.

... [About 'Don't Ask, Can't Tell'] Um... actually, they can't tell what I am unless I tell them. They are the ones gender confused, not me.

...There are over 170 conditions that are considered an Intersexed condition. The term Divergent Sexual Development is a newer term. So, between IS and DSD conditions its well over 170+ physiological conditions that results in a gender other than the standard man/woman meme. There conditions are unique to each individual. The expressions of the conditions can be so unique as to baffle a run of the mill General Practition Doctor. Often those with IS and DSD conditions are not diagnosed until they reach that time in life that they wish to start a family and find out that they just aren't equipped for it. It is believed that fully 60%+ simply do not know that they have an IS/DSD condition because they are fertile and do start families with natural born offspring.

Off all the various IS/DSD conditions, there is only one that can result in organ(s) of both genders. Chimerism, more specifically cross-gender Chimerism. That's 46XX/46XY genotype. Many people believe that only the primary sex organs are what matters for hermaphroditism. Nope, every organ in whole or part is up for grabs when you're a Chimera and some or all of one organ can belong to... um... my sister/brother. Heck my blood type is A+ with an occasional hint of O-.

From reflecting on Gina9223's unique perspective, I have been able to draw some interesting conclusions. The use of "intersex" as a category, has created a place for the group of a multitude of people who would fall under the "other" that does not fit within America's male/female dichotomy. This creation of an "other" category helps to preserve the two-gender system, rather than allowing for more pluralistic concepts of gender. It prevents our entire social structure from falling apart, but it also forces us to restrict what could otherwise be a multitude of gender possibility.

Through this lens, it is interesting that science has enabled transsexuality, through the development of hormone therapy, imaging technologies, plastic surgery, and sex-reassignment surgery. Like the category of "intersex," these technologies allow for (or force) conformity to the 2-gender system. It is important, however, to note that despite the scientific justifications for changing our bodies, science is not an isolated factor in this need to change bodies. Another important factor is the inescapable desires of a consumer society. The desire

to redesign our bodies through science is not so distinct from the desire that compels people to buy clothing, make-up, cars, or try new weight-loss plans. It is all a part of the feeling that we need to reach the unreachable, ideal human. This insatiable desire can be understood through Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. According to Marx, capitalism, through the division of labor, lengthening of the workday, and removal of the products of a person's labor from his sight, causes workers to become alienated from their labor and feel a strong sense of lack. The workers then desire commodities as replacements for that lack, and so the commodity becomes a fetish, an illusory stand-in for that self-lack. Because the commodity can never fully replace what has been lost through alienation, people must constantly consume though they can never be completely satisfied.¹²³ Technologies have allowed fetishism to grow to the level of body alteration, which becomes an allegory for changing the self. Take for example, a woman who get a new haircut or loses weight and then describes herself saying, "check out the new me," describing herself as a changed person.

Within late-stage capitalism, prolific commoditization generates new means of expressing gender. Commodities enable people to imagine that their self is changing through their purchases. Marx described this perception of self-change through purchases as an illusion. Indeed, this process of self-change is imaginative and intangible, but that does not mean that it is superficial. People present gender tangibly, visibly, and often with the use of commodities. But through perception these indicators can be translated to the intangible realm where gender is collectively imagined. Thus, commodities can be generative in the way they affect the imagination of gender, creating countless new possibilities through

¹²³ Marx, Karl, 1818-1883. *Capital : A critique of political economy*. Kapital. english., ed. Ben Fowkes New York : Vintage Books, 1977, c1976-<1981>.

designs and technologies. This collective imagination of gender is complicated because it is impossible for the individual's imagination of gender to completely match the collective imagination of that gender. The self and society are constantly conversing and reshaping gender, both as public knowledge and as individual identity.

Drag Bingo is a perfect example of a site where gender divergence becomes a commodity. At eighteen dollars a person for admission, what does it mean that people are coming and bringing their whole family plus spending additional money on concessions? Conversely, what does it mean to spend one hundred dollars on a dress? Drag Bingo is a particular kind of gender consumption that only certain people in society can access. Buying the experience of watching or performing drag simultaneously reinforces conformity to gender norms (i.e. expensive clothes are necessary for gender) and pushes back at gender hegemony by allowing for a creative construction of gender within the space of Drag Bingo. It is a place for frivolity and semi-raucous rule breaking, as long as it's PG-13. People are free to jump to their feet and wiggle wildly, but they still know that Grandma is in the room. The spectacle of Drag Bingo is highly commodified. However, this purchase is quite different than that of Marx's fetishism in which the commodity has control over the consumer. Rather, drag allows for the expression of desires that would elsewhere be suppressed, creating substantial not illusory effects for this individual. It is interesting to look at the rise of drag within the mainstream, normative social realm in the past decade or two. As more and more people want to see drag and enjoy it, it is important to ask: what work is this commodity doing?

Chapter 3

The Work of Drag Bingo

“When we’re there we’re there for the purpose of the Alliance. But we also are able to breakdown walls about what a gay person is and what a straight person is.”

--- Mary K. Mart

I set out this research process with the expectation that Drag Bingo would be all about redefining American concepts of gender. I have found that in some ways that is true, but not as directly as I would have expected. The first concept that threw me for a loop was the idea that fundraising was actually Drag Bingo’s primary purpose. Throughout the processes of conducting interviews, I was constantly being re-directed back to the great cause of helping people with HIV/AIDS. I was always surprised when I asked people about why they participated in Drag Bingo and they told me it was about giving back. Was this what linked the people together at drag bingo, that they all shared a common value in civic action? Were they all there because they were gaining some personal fulfillment for taking part in an effort to raise money for charity? Were the audience members there to fight for a common cause? Ultimately, I saw that Drag Bingo did have a deeper significance related to gender and sexuality. In order to see this significance, I first had to understand the fundraising component about which people kept reminding me. What exactly was being transacted through this charity?

First, the idea of charity does not so much reflect why Drag Bingo is so enticing; but it is an indicator of class. This desire to participate in giving back is a defining characteristic of the audience at Drag Bingo, which speaks to the class of that community. This mentality reflects middle-class values. When people go to Drag Bingo, it affirms that they are civic minded, socially conscious, interested in diversity, and in building their sense of community.

Even more significantly, Drag Bingo is a place where they can and *should* bring their children to experience these things with the aim of cultivating certain knowledge or values in them. The idea that Drag Bingo is an enriching, cultural experience for families and their children reflects the civic-minded value system within the middle-class family. For Drag Bingo's audience "giving back" is familiar and legitimizing. It provides a justification and purpose for the purchase of this special experience.

Besides the familiarity of "giving back", the fact that Drag Bingo is a place to bring children describes the middle class values of the audience. Bringing children to Drag Bingo is more than just a matter of convenience; it is premised on the idea that Drag Bingo will directly serve as a positive learning tool to cultivate certain virtues. In her book *Unequal Childhood: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau describes how middle-class families and working-class families differ in their child-rearing practices and standards. Lareau closely observed twelve families with children that were nine to ten years old and found significant patterns that distinguished childrearing along class lines. Her book describes the way the basic elements of family life follow these cultural lines.¹²⁴ Lareau describes the American middle class childrearing experience as "a process of *concerted cultivation*" in which the parent actively engages the child in organized activities meant to develop the child's talents, opinions, and skills. According to Lareau, this *concerted cultivation* manifests itself in three fundamental areas: the organization of daily life, language use, and interactions between families and institutions.¹²⁵ In her argument, one of the primary differences in the way children are raised is that in working class families there is a strong boundary between children and adults whereas in middle class families the child spends

¹²⁴ Lareau, Annette. *Unequal childhoods : Class, race, and family life* Berkeley : University of California Press, c2003, 3.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

much more time interacting with adults both in family life and in institutional settings and is treated much more on a grown-up level. Several cultural patterns describe this difference of adult-child relationships. Middle-class parents tend to provide lots of structured activities for their children, chauffeuring them around to sports practice, music lessons, etc. Lareau claims that middle-class children often have around four different such organized activities each week whereas working-class children are more likely to have one activity and then spend a lot more time independently-organizing their leisure just playing and hanging out. Another factor in determining the child-adult boundary is language use. Lareau reports that middle-class parents frequently use “reasoning” with their children rather than “directives” as working-class parents use, establishing a clear hierarchy between adults and children. These “directives” augment the affect of the physical separation of child and adult activities. In addition to these differences, children’s access within institutions marks a stark difference between middle and working-class child development. Middle-class parents tend to foster a sense of entitlement in children and train the child to be able to criticize and intervene in institutions enabling their children to maximize their resources in such settings. Parents often intervene on a child’s behalf, such as by speaking with a teacher to get them to accommodate the child’s learning style.¹²⁶ On the other hand, working-class parents, often express their powerlessness within and dependency on the institutions, teaching their children to endure situations that do not best suit their needs. As a result, instead of having feeling of entitlement, working-class children develop a stronger sense of constraint within institutional settings.¹²⁷ Lareau describes working-class parenting as the *accomplishment of natural growth*. In their commitment to provide for the basic needs for their children like food and

¹²⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 31.

shelter, these parents operate with a laissez-faire mentality in regards to their children's leisure activities, allowing them to grow naturally rather than deliberately cultivating their potential.¹²⁸ By Lareau's analysis this "cultural logic of child rearing at home is out of synch with the standards of institutions."¹²⁹

Drag Bingo tends to align more with Lareau's description of the middle-class. The



Drag Bingo Enthusiast, courtesy of <http://www.dragbingo.com/>

environment is that of leisure within an institutional setting. People who attend Drag Bingo are consciously bringing themselves and often their family members and children into this institutional environment as a form of organized leisure activity aimed at both entertainment and learning. Also, the ticket price draws a middle-class audience. This price of admission to Drag Bingo is eighteen dollars per person, plus that of what many people spend on concessions or the five dollars some spend on special 50/50 bingo cards for a shot at winning a money prize usually around \$500. When I asked people why they attended Drag Bingo they typically described the outing in terms of leisure, cultivation, and charity. "It's fun and it's different. It opens your mind and gets you out of your comfort zone." on respondent

¹²⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 3.

said. He added later “it’s entertaining and for a good cause – the cause was the main reason and I also wanted to come.” Though I do not think he meant to say so, this comment shows how charity and leisure are not ideologically intersecting. Charity is understood more as a responsibility that takes effort; it is not leisurely. I have found that the a great deal of the audience members attend Drag Bingo multiple times a year or when it is their first time attending they say that they plan to come back. This regularity of attendance makes me question the extent to which “the good cause” really is the main reason people go. I have attended four Drag Bingos so far and already I feel that I have the show memorized, besides the alternating themes each month that affected the costumes, music and decorations. Drag Bingo is cheaper and less pretentious than say going to the opera, but it’s not exactly the kind of place you casually decide to go to on a Saturday night if you are struggling to meet your family’s basic needs of food and shelter. Drag Bingo conforms well to Lareau’s description of middle-class childrearing because it is an organized activity that many people see a cultivating certain values. During the intermission at September’s Drag Bingo, I interviewed a young married heterosexual couple who was experiencing Drag Bingo for the first time. I mostly wanted to know about their first impressions and what they thought of the family atmosphere. They told me that they had not expected there to be as many families here but thought that it was great to have “a good safe environment for non-traditional families.” They had come for the fundraising cause and because it looked fun and different, but they had learned that the mixed family atmosphere was an important experience as well. They told me that when the more-traditional families, exposure to these “non-traditional families” at Drag Bingo leads to a “more progressive city” and “lowers hate crimes and discrimination.” They also described it as a good place to teach kids about difference and said that “it’s a good

outlet for kids to see gay and lesbian people that's a stereotype based on television." These ideals align perfectly with Lareau's concept of deliberate cultivation in middle-class parenting.

In addition, Drag Bingo is a place where children have a great deal of contact with adults, sit among the adults, and if they win a prize they are encouraged to say their name and age and answer questions about themselves into a microphone for a room full of adults. Some older children volunteer as well, and in doing so they work on an equal level with adult volunteers. For example, the first time, I volunteered at Drag Bingo in August, Melissa's two girls worked at the entrance with me, handing people their bingo cards while I tore their tickets. There was also another girl my age and a middle-age woman who were helping us and together we all interacted on a pretty equal level. The children were acting like us and interacting with us, weakening the child-adult boundary.

It is important to recognize that Lareau's middle and working-class groups are ideal types woven from cultural patterns but which are much more complex and less coherent than her use of the terms would suggest. The idea of socio-economic class is not something that divides people into clean categories. Rather, class is an idea. Lareau's work shows the tangible evidence of the effects of class in American society, but her analysis still depicted these separate quintessential entities that exist as ideas but not as physical isolations. Middle and working-class divides in reality are not as clear-cut and more complicated than simply outcomes of salary. In the US lifestyle and values are an amalgam of different factors, which can change throughout a person's lifetime and even within different daily settings.

Recognizing this point, it is easier to see how the crowd at Drag Bingo is a fairly diverse group that represents a flexible construction of the middle-class. Drag Bingo

consciously maintains a safe, family-oriented environment, but the audience is not a homogenous group of nuclear families with a mother father and one or two children. These family prototypes are simply one piece of the collage of people at the Durham Armory each month. On any given night at Drag Bingo, I would expect to find a whole number of different groups in the audience: a coed group of middle-aged adults, a lesbian couple, members of LGBT affiliated political and social organizations, a group of coworkers who have reserved a section of a table, an unwed mother and her friend, a bachelorette party, a high-school librarian with her brother, college students (hardly anyone I recognized from Duke, though I have heard Duke students say they have attended before), a mother with her twenty-one year old straight daughter, a mother with her twenty-one year old gay son, a high school musical theater group, a young married heterosexual couple who do not want children, a BVD's "husband," another BVD's grandmother, an elderly man who attends alone, a transgender teenager with his friend, a bunch of extended family members from out of town visiting their relative.

The community is an assorted group organized by certain operational guidelines. Drag Bingo is an integrating space that pushes the limits of what the American middle-class family should be. Yet the sanctity of the family appropriate atmosphere is always preserved with utmost priority. For instance, at the October Bingo the audience had been invited to dress-up and enter a costume contest, but there was an experienced volunteer whose duty it was to make sure that everyone had dressed appropriately to present their costume to the audience. Anyone with an overtly sexual costume would have to be pulled from the line and asked to sit down. When the high school musical theater group came to Drag Bingo, John-Paul announced that if any of the high schoolers won that he would be required to call that

person's parents for permission to award a prize. Drag Bingo has a few child prizes (water bottles or candy), but many of the "adult" prizes are donated from Cherry Pie, an "adult superstore" in Raleigh that sells pornography, lingerie, and sex paraphernalia. I found out from the volunteer coordinator Melissa in a formal interview that Cherry Pie donates a lot of lubricant and massage oil. I had already been to several Drag Bingos but was aware that some prizes were a little risqué. I had heard John-Paul and Mary announce a few gift certificate prizes from local restaurants or stores, but only occasionally did they say what the prize was and in little detail focusing instead on the winner, where they are from, their occupation, if it is their first time at drag bingo or not. I did recall a common reaction that when people would get their gift bags their eyes would widen or they would chuckle a bit. But this reaction was subtle, like many of Mary's jokes that "almost cross the line" as Melissa puts it. My interviewees all told me about the way Drag Bingo actively works to maintain the family environment: keeping jokes PG-13, presenting a "respectable" image for the Alliance,

Drag Bingo maintains this middle ground between censoring itself to maintain a certain level of appropriateness while also pushing at the bounds of what is appropriate in everyday life. The whole appeal of Drag Bingo is that it is frivolous and strange to see men dressing as extravagant divas. My interviewees repeatedly told me that you go to drag bingo to have a different kind of experience that you cannot have every day. Yet while Drag Bingo is fun and silly, it is not reckless and wild. "I've been to CC's and Legends [two nightclubs in Raleigh that have drag shows]...Drag Bingo is a little more controlled, not outrageous, in a good way," Fran told me a twenty-nine year old pharmaceutical research contractor from Hillsboro North Carolina who attends Drag Bingo several times a year with her mother. The

other drag venues she has experienced involve a later night scene and involve alcohol. To gauge the difference, I too went to CC's (the Capital Coral nightclub) for a drag show one night. I found that the performances were much more provocative, employing sexy body language and more bawdy verbal language. One performer even lifted her dress for a peek at her artificial vagina. BVDs at Drag Bingo know not to pull an act like that at the Armory because it would be threatening in a safe space like Drag Bingo and would have a horrific impact on Drag Bingo's image. Yet, R-rated themes are not totally absent from Drag Bingo either; instead they are produced in a way that, as Melissa described, can go over children's heads. For instance one of the rules of Drag Bingo is when O-69 is called, people must stand up, wave their arms above their head, wiggle their whole body and yell "woooooo!," or else face the embarrassment of being called up to the stage to perform the ludicrous act in front of the whole audience. Each time Mary K. Mart explains this rule, she hints at O-69's dirtier origin at her Sunday night Trailer Park Bingo at Flex Nightclub. She says, "I'm not going to tell you what we yell out at Trailer Park Bingo, but if you know what it is please do not yell that!" The O-69 rule transforms dirty to silly, but Mary reminds people of the rule's dirty root, allowing people to imagine for themselves what inappropriate phrase you might have to yell at Trailer Park Bingo relating to the kamasutra 69 sex- position. Instead of being downright raunchy, Mary and John-Paul tend to approach that territory but stay just outside its border. Their humor is usually sardonic, poking fun at American celebrity icons, media, and fad diet plans, but it is never sexual or shocking.

One audience member I talked to discussed this pushing of boundaries at Drag Bingo, saying that it had a positive effect on audience members by exposing them to minor taboos in a celebratory way. He explained that he wanted to bring his parents to Drag Bingo because

they were less open to non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality and to same-sex relationships. He felt that Drag Bingo would broaden their perception of the LGBT community and make them more accepting by forcing them to test their assumptions. “It’s good to get out of your comfort zone. If you experience it, it lowers your fear,” he said. This man was talking around a really important concept that defines sexual and gender subjectivity in the US: the dynamic of fear and regulation. Drag Bingo allows people to transgress the boundaries of everyday gender regulation and in doing so confront the fear embedded in regulatory regimes. Drag Bingo is a safe and controlled environment that confronts regulatory regimes lightly not radically, thus allowing people to really benefit from this resistance without feeling threatened. Drag Bingo simply tests the cultural constructs of gender and sexuality but does not knock them down. The experience can be liberatory, but not scary.

Many people who I spoke to discussed the importance of the integrating environment at Drag Bingo. For Jan Muller¹³⁰ that integration is one of the most significant aspects of Drag Bingo, despite her position as an accounting assistant for the Alliance. Raising money to support those fighting HIV/AIDS is important to Jan, as she has been involved with the Alliance since the early eighties well before Drag Bingo was created. Nevertheless, Jan is speaking from two standpoints, as someone who handles finances at the Alliance, but also as a proud lesbian and advocate for LGBT rights and visibility. “I am a lesbian,” she told me firmly within the first few minutes of our interview asserting her identity before I had even asked her how she identified. Jan told me about the difficulties many LGBT individuals experience with American’s automatic closeting of any gender and sexual possibilities that breach the hetero-norm. She was denied a job once for asking during an interview about the

¹³⁰ Jan Muller, formal interview, October 20, 2009.

company's policy on insurance for same-sex partnerships. "He clammed up and the interview was over," she said. Jan also believes she was discriminated against by a police officer who pulled her over when she was not speeding. She displayed a gay pride rainbow and equal sign sticker for LGBT equality on the back of her car and told me that she could tell by the way the officer interacted with her that he had pulled her over because what she presented on her car. Another time, Jan and her girlfriend sat next to each other at a restaurant and a heterosexual couple nearby asked to move. Even close friends had betrayed her, saying "don't do anything demonstrative, like kiss her at the table" when Jan had planned to introduce them to her girlfriend. "I wouldn't even consider that. It was so unexpected and hurtful," Jan told me. Being able to be "out" and experiencing the same privileges and freedoms as heterosexual people is really important to Jan, but society constantly forces her to conform to heterosexual norms nearly everywhere. Basic hetero-normative assumptions constantly closet LGBT folks against their will while going unnoticed to non-LGBT folks. For Jan a particularly annoying example of this is routine: when she is asked to check 'married' or 'single' on forms of one sort or another. While the state denies her right to be recognized in a same-sex union, she still finds it "offensive to say you are single if you are with a long-term same-sex partner." Such assumptions infiltrate everyday routines, pervasively confronting LGBT people without causing straight people to bat an eye.

For Jan, Drag Bingo is important because it is a mixed site of LGBT and straight people interacting together. Here, she is able to be visible as a lesbian without standing out as odd or facing the extra hassle of defending her identity. At Drag Bingo, she can be proud of and open about who she is and still slip into the backdrop of what is usual there. However, Drag Bingo is also important to Jan because it allows straight people to see and learn about

the diversity and normalcy of the LGBT community. “I hate when people ask, ‘What are gay people like? What do they like?’” Annoyed Jan likes to redirect ignorant questions back to the askers: *Well what are black people like? White people like? Women like?* “The gay community encompasses everybody,” she said. Drag Bingo challenges stereotypes and provides a way for straight folks to see that the LGBT community is part of the basic community of people in America. Sexual and gender orientation set apart LGBT and hetero-normative folks, but there are a million other connections between these two groups that make them a part of one community. By integrating these groups in a setting that makes sexual diversity visible, hetero-normative folks are able to see what Jan already knows -- that they blend quite smoothly into one population.

When I talked with Jan, she told me she had been working at her job with the Alliance for about a year, having joined after her first attendance at Drag Bingo. “I had so much fun. It was wonderful to see such a healthy mix of hetero and gay people to have fun... Mostly, it was the fact that everybody was welcome... Everybody knows they are welcome.” This visible blending of LGBT and hetero-normative people as part of one community breaks down assumptions about “the other” while also freeing people to challenge their own assumptions about themselves. “More people have progressively come comfortable wearing whatever they want. There is a man in the audience who comes in a dress,” Jan explained. This cross-dressing audience member typically presented as a hetero-normative guy who wore a suit to work, but he loved wearing a dress at Drag Bingo and showing himself off. He even had a business card made with a picture of himself in a dress there. As this man’s cross-dressing show, Drag Bingo deconstructs what has become natural to its audience members without forcing them to give up their life outside the Armory. At Drag Bingo, Mary K. Mart

explained, there are “a lot of people who want to see a drag show, but don’t want to go to a gay bar.”¹³¹ These people are open to confronting their assumptions about gender and sexuality -- but they are not people who are frequently exposed to drag, ideas about gender performance, or LGBT focused programming in their daily lives; nevertheless they are not complacent with that limited perspective and they come open to what the Drag Bingo experience can offer. Drag Bingo can push back at society’s regulatory regimes in a way that permeates regular society because it pushes in a controlled, safe, and legitimized environment rather than at 2 am in Flex Nightclub’s underground bar.

While Jan discussed how Drag Bingo could teach others about herself, Fran Sawyer¹³² told me about how she was drawn to Drag Bingo to learn from these teachings. Fran has two family members and one friend whose identities as LGBT sparked her curiosity. After her cousin came out she began renting social documentaries to expose herself to ideas that she was previously unaware of. “The whole community of queerness is not as mainstream if you’re not actively involved in that community. I only really see it when we go to Drag Bingo,” she said. As a child Fran had little exposure to non-hetero-normative gender and sexuality. She grew up in a small town where her parents kept her “occupied” and “not into popular culture.” She told me that she “lived under a rock until college,” when she finally became aware of what drag was and had her “first larger exposure to gay people in general.” For Fran going Drag Bingo is a way for her to become more aware of things that she was not taught in her own family. “I wonder if there’s ever [too much] openness but still I have prejudices based on my parents, like a knee-jerk reaction ‘hmm, that’s different!’ My parents’ views have been imparted on me, but I’m trying to broaden my horizons... It’s a

¹³¹ Mary K. Mart, October 13, 2009.

¹³² Fran Sawyer, formal interview, October 21, 2009 and December 1, 2009.

way to learn about others since I'm not exposed in my own family." Fran goes to Drag Bingo with her mother, thus bringing her individual exploration into her family, seeing the shared experience as a "conversation starter." When the questioning and testing of assumptions about gender and sexuality are brought into the family arena, it affects the way social ideologies are reproduced through family value systems.

People who go to Drag Bingo feel that it is a place that anyone can attend and feel welcomed and be comfortable. Those who organize Drag Bingo (the Bingo Committee) actively try to maintain this vibe by keeping Drag Bingo from being seen as LGBT affiliated. Melissa, the volunteer coordinator, told me that once a man in the audience stood up with a rainbow flag and yelled, "Welcome to Gay Pride 2009!" and they were worried about the effect of this overt message. She explained how it is important for Drag Bingo to maintain the mixed environment and its appeal to its hetero-normative population. Besides a diversity of sexual orientation this lack of sexual classification helps to keep Drag Bingo appealing to an array of age demographics. "I love when someone can't find a spot for their grandma because we're so generational," Melissa said. The generational spectrum at Drag Bingo (from the baby on his mother's hip to the grandmother who can't find a spot) is important to the work that Drag Bingo performs on the community because it helps bridge a gap in the levels of learning and opening between the young and old in families. When a person attends Drag Bingo with their parent or child, both parties are learning in a way that is legitimized within the family. The intergenerational dynamic prevents people's learning from regressing when they are unable to share their experiences with their family, avoiding disapproval from parents and elders or protecting their children's innocent ears. Drag Bingo is helping to cause

social progress at the level of the family, affecting concepts of gender and sexuality within the family, a site where social values are produced and reproduced.

Given that people at Drag Bingo so often stress the importance of mixing and diversity, Drag Bingo is not the melting pot people imagine. I have spoken about class, family role, generation, and sexual and gender identification, but I still need to discuss race. Racially, Drag Bingo is fairly homogenous: white, with a sprinkling of darker skins tones here and there. I specifically remember Mary K. Mart yelling “Aye-aye-aye-aye-aye-aye-aye!” every time she drew an ‘I’ at the October Drag Bingo and asking “Are there any Hispanic people in the audience?” to which there was no reply. At each of the Drag Bingos that I have attended there have been a few groups of Asians and African Americans, but these groups tend to be in their twenties and thirties with a majority of females present in the group, in contrast with the white population’s greater numbers, broader age range, and more even male-female ratio. These are generalizations I have made based on only a few impressions, and as Drag Bingo does not record the demographic information of its audiences I cannot provide adequate percentages. I can say from my observations and interviews that the audience changes every month, save for a “core group of about a hundred people who come to every single one,” according to Melissa.¹³³ Drag Bingo organizers only advertise in a few stores where they can flier for free, so the message is passed along primarily by word of mouth through family and friends of people who have attended.¹³⁴

Brian Denton, who has been involved with Drag Bingo since the end of 2003 performing as BVD Sierra Nevada, told me that after a thorough marketing study the Bingo Committee discovered they could quit advertising because it was not generating effects.

¹³³ Melissa Cartwright-Dressler, formal interview, November 19, 2009.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Instead, they rely completely on emails and word-of-mouth, gradually growing its audience of “a zillion different little groups.”¹³⁵ Admittedly, Brian said, “I wish our audience was more diverse [racially].” According to Brian, the “in-road” for increasing interest from adult African Americans is through the Armory’s janitorial staff who have seen the show and told their friends “you’ve gotta see this!” Brian claimed that these African American men and women, primarily in their fifties, love the show the most, laughing, cheering, and telling their friends.¹³⁶

The way word about Drag Bingo spreads within racially contained circles speaks to the nature of the event as something that a lot of people come to with families and close friends, but it also speaks to the racial distinctiveness of American cultural spheres. I have often heard people speak of America as a melting pot for diverse racial and ethnic groups but I would not say that these groups have truly melted. American society is much more like a mosaic in which the cultural distinctness of different ethnic and racial groups is still quite obvious.

Brian’s observation informs us of the different standards of gender experienced across different racial groups within American culture. It is difficult to get older African Americans to Drag Bingo in the first place, but when they do come they find it particularly hysterical to watch men dress up as divas. These points reflect a different kind of pressure on black Americans to conform to strict ideals of masculinity and femininity. Expectations for black masculinity and femininity have a whole history in the news media, racism, slavery, hip-hop music, sports, and popular culture. In the context of these uneven pressures, some gender movements that reject the male-female dichotomy are more palatable to whites than

¹³⁵ Brian Denton, formal interview, November 23, 2009.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

to blacks because the ability to reject social standards for gender is a privilege that comes easier to those who have experienced the pressure less. This racial privilege is intricately linked to economic class privilege. For instance, people who have experienced financial comfort enjoy the luxury to reject materialism and to not value expensive goods. As black Americans carry a larger economic burden than whites, they are more susceptible to entrapment by the dominant commercial order and the strong gender ideologies that commercial products sell. Drag Bingo's audience certainly reflects these race and class disparities. Drag Bingo not only appeals to racial groups differently but it also provides them with different kinds of pleasure. This racial imbalance leads me to believe that the experience means more than just casual entertainment, but that it is actually carrying out social work.

The allegiance of audience members to Drag Bingo makes a strong case for this idea that Drag Bingo is performing social work. When asking audience members why they go to Drag Bingo, their first response is almost always that it is fun and that they care about the cause. At first this response seemed logical to me, but when Melissa told me about the one hundred core people that come every single time, I needed more. "It's like watching *Titanic* over and over again, every single time. I'm like haven't you people heard these jokes before?" Melissa said laughing. I immediately agreed, thinking of many times I'd heard Mary K. Mart bellow "B-9! -- It's not a tumor it's *benign*!" Melissa told me about one man in particular who comes to every single Drag Bingo and has been doing so for years, never wavering. She told me she had asked several times if he would be interested in volunteering or coming to the Bingo Committee Meeting. But he doesn't want to get involved. He just wants to pay for his ticket and come and watch the show every single month. If this man and the other hundred core audience members cared so much about raising money for the people

living with HIV/AIDS they would not need to come to Drag Bingo, they could simply send a large check each month directly to the Alliance. Or they could get involved on the volunteering and organizing end if they really cared about the success of the event. But they do not.

Sure, Drag Bingo is a fun source of weekend entertainment for friends or family. Going to the movies is fun, too, but people don't generally go see (and not to mention pay for) the same movie over and over again. So when I look at people's responses that they go to Drag Bingo because it is fun and they care about the cause, I know there must be something more there, and I have begun asking *why is it so much fun?*

Drag Bingo has a distinct intrigue to it. I remember telling an acquaintance about my thesis and when I told him I was studying Drag Bingo and did he know what that was, he exclaimed: "I've always wanted to go to one of those!" This intrigue is related to how Drag Bingo is actually doing work in the community, how it has a function within people's lives. This function may be diverted by the focus on raising money, but it is what drives people to keep coming back over and over again.

So what is this function of drag bingo? What work is being done here?

In an environment full of regulation and fear, Drag Bingo is a place where it is safe to transgress gender and sexual rules. Drag Bingo is a queer space, where norms can be broken down, but while operating in this safe place. Gender can be explored in this safe space, without shame or stigmas. This safety applies to the performers as well as the audience, because the expectations of the drag illusion are low. "Drag Bingo is less judgmental. It's easier to perform for a straight crowd. A gay crowd is more picky." Mary K. Mart told me.

“A lot of people want to see a drag show, but they don’t want to go to a gay bar. Drag Bingo has a neutral atmosphere. It’s more inviting.” Some performers do dazzle the audience while “some suck,” as Melissa admitted¹³⁷. But that is okay, because the audience is receptive to all of it. The queerness of Drag Bingo is silly, while not disrespectful. It allows us all to go and laugh at ourselves. This lack of seriousness adds to the safety net of Drag Bingo, allowing us to be creative and play with gender without having serious life implications. If a man wants to go to Drag Bingo in a dress, it simply means that he wants to wear a dress and nothing more. Every other day of the month he can still be a straight-laced suit-wearing business executive if he likes. But at Drag Bingo things are queer. Experiences are different. They fall outside of the normal experiences people can have in their everyday lives. I believe that many people are drawn to Drag Bingo because of their need to push back a bit at these normal everyday experiences. It allows people to see a man in a dress and ask themselves why that is something that normally makes us uncomfortable.

Drag Bingo is a place where people come to learn and teach about difference, while sharing the experience of seeing drag both at the Armory and in their everyday routines. Drag Bingo enables the family to become a site that can incorporate what people learn about non-normativity. For people whose gender identity or sexual orientation does not conform to social norms, Drag Bingo allows these individuals to include their family in their search to define, explore and understand what gender and sex mean to them. This inclusion is particularly important for a few people in the audience who are transgender. For example, one woman had a child who was born a boy but at age seven realized that she was a girl. For her fifth birthday all she wanted was her penis removed. The little girl is one of the youngest children diagnosed as transgender. At first the mother was hesitant to bring her family to

¹³⁷ Melissa Cartwright-Dressler, formal interview, November 19, 2009.

Drag Bingo, worried that it would make a joke of her child's serious and sensitive experience. As it turns out, the ridiculous nature of Drag Bingo was exactly what her family needed. She brought along her two other children, both boys, and the event really helped them all get comfortable with gender bending.

It can be difficult to include non-normative sex and gender exploration into the family because of the intense focus on protecting children from sex and sexuality. But Americans' sex-phobia is harmful to children, teach them to be ashamed of their sexuality, particularly children who do not fit into social norm groups. Rodessa put it quite well when talking with me about the difficulty parents face when children come out to them as LGBT, "You don't want to think about your child as sexual or prepared to be sexual...I'd be petrified!" This anxiety is exacerbated by the reputation LGBT cultures have as deriving from "underground," late-night, big city, party scenes that have no place in the family. Even the safe, family-oriented Drag Bingo comes across as unsafe and possibly disruptive to some outsiders. I interviewed an administrator at the nearby high school North Carolina School for Science and Math. The school's policies toward LGBT student resources are forward thinking. The administrator told me that the North Carolina Transgender Association would be coming the next week to advise them on good ways to handle gender issues with students. Yet, he still showed fear when I asked him if students had access to Drag Bingo. "I don't want to take them to a sex workshop," he said. His uninformed impression of Drag Bingo showcases the concept that sex (and gender) must be highly regulated to protect children. Ironically, this demonstration of fear is exactly what replicates norms and perpetually causes shame, anxiety, and disgust about gender and sexuality, particularly for LGBT children but for everyone.

Lastly, Drag Bingo serves a crucial role in its position between fantasy and reality. When Brian Denton was interviewed as Sierra Nevada for the *Durham Herald Sun* newspaper, he refused to tell the paper that his non-drag name was Brian because it would weaken the illusion of Sierra's character. "I told them only Sierra because you're supposed to think of Sierra as Sierra not as Brian in a dress." I have talked to Brian as Brian and as Sierra and I still have trouble seeing Sierra as Brian in a dress. I have seen drag queens transform before my eyes, emerging from the dressing room completely different. I have also seen them transform slowly, as they gradually get into costume in the dressing room. What I have realized is that when you watch the BVDs perform, their characters completely take shape. It is easy to tell that most of them are, in fact men, in dresses, but because our concepts of gender are so essentially based on performance, imagination completes the illusion that you are seeing a woman. The characterization of Mary K. Mart, Anita Strong Man, Rodessa Rhodehard, Sierra Nevada, Aurora Scott, and the other BVDs is simultaneously an illusion and a reflection of the reality of gender performance. The characters' personalities and lives are fiction, an illusion that awes us, but the reality of the daily illusion of gender performance that we all buy into is something we recognize with shocking familiarity. Thus, the drag show causes a double take of sorts, through this combination of recognition and amazement. As a result, what we see as natural is replaced by a fantasy experience that is whimsical and subverts gender rules. However, through the routine enactment of these alter identities each month, the fantasy gets streamlined with its own set of regulatory rules and expectations. These fantastic identities are solidified through the social interaction between drag character and the audience each month, which generates an understanding of what these alter identities encompass. These identities are based in a visual materiality, making the fantasy a tangible

experience. Thus, Mary and Sierra are on the one hand psychic illusions that represent new understandings of gender. On the other hand, they are corporal fantasies that you can touch and talk to.

Chapter 4: A New Order?

The work of Drag Bingo might suggest that American society is beginning to restructure itself. In this chapter, I zoom out and look at society more broadly in order to understand the socially evolving characteristics of gender. Americans are becoming more aware and socially conscious of non-normative sex and gender identities. Are we adapting in a way that is weakening the dominant heterosexual order? Is American society becoming more gender neutral? I use the conversations I have had with interviewees as well as theoretical reflections in conjunction with this broader concept of de-normalizing gender in our fundamental social structures.

I. Coming Out

“We have a lot of confused people here. Are there any yet to be determined?... I came out at Thanksgiving, at the Table. Would you like some mashed potatoes? Yes mother, *I’m gay.*” The audience laughed. Mary had a way of taking the edge off of serious subjects. Her comment brought up the emphasis we place on the coming out saga. US culture makes coming out a pivotal moment, specifically within the family. Coming out, short for the colloquial expression “coming out of the closet,” conveys a great deal about American concepts of sexuality and gender and their interrelations within a dominant heterosexual order. Coming out implies that a person has always been gay but he had to learn to admit it to himself and then emerge with a new social identity to those he knows and meets. The out individual is now understood as a different person than the person who was in the closet. He is expected to embrace new hobbies and forms of expressing his gayness. People presume that he might buy new clothes, listen to new music, speak differently, or relate to others

differently. Suddenly he is a new person. But coming out is not always this instantaneous moment of change in which everyone the out individual encounters suddenly understands him to be gay. I recently attended the Duke LGBT Center Ally Training program to learn about how I can be a supportive friend and advocate of LGBT people on campus. The program leaders described coming out as a long process with many different stages and explained that coming out is not a single instant, but something that LGBT individuals have to do everywhere they go for the rest of their lives, otherwise they will be assumed to be heterosexual and gender normative. Performing certain stereotypes of gayness (the new clothes, music, and lifestyle) can be a way for some people to cope with the hetero-normative order that is forced upon them everywhere.

Me: I've heard that some cultures do not find it necessary to come out, that sexuality is a private matter. What do you think? Is it necessary to be out?

Brian: It is good for your own mental health to be out. It sets a good example for those struggling with gender and sexuality issues and to the general population to say I'm here and I'm just as legitimate. I went through fears before I came out but then I said okay, if someone cares that I'm gay, then I don't want them as a friend.

Coming out is an important part of the American story of sexuality because everyone is already out as heterosexual, unless they prove otherwise. Social institutions assume heterosexual orders, silencing an entire array of deviant behaviors and desires. Sexual and gender identity *must be told* because it is already being told for us. Brian's "I'm here and I'm just as legitimate!" comes from an assumed lack of legitimacy for many of the things he feels, wants, and does. Everywhere he goes those feelings, desires, and actions are denied as appropriate. That lack of validation becomes ingrained in him to the point that the taboos cause him to come right out of the closet: "I'm GAY!" This idea that one has to emerge in society as gay shows our obsession with needing to make our sexual behaviors and desires define us, and thus limit our polymorphous possibilities. Rather than celebrating complex

desires, expressions like “I’m gay,” are self-containing. Brian is forced to claim an identity because it offers some sense of validation that is missed by society’s rules. Coming out says: ‘I’m not just defying the heterosexual system for fun. I have no choice because this is who I am!’

But despite the mental health benefits of coming out, it is not a complete rejection of society’s heterosexual order. The importance of coming out in American culture enforces heterosexism. Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless they come out as gay or otherwise and that heterosexuality is superior to other sexual identities.¹³⁸ This importance also reflects an obsession with needing to *be* something, to have a sexual identity that is defined by what we do and tells us what we can do. We want to label and to categorize, but we only have a few words with which to label and we only like to assign one label to each individual. But having a label limits the freedom we have to act on our various desires. In an essay *From the Polluted Homosexual to the Normal Gay*, Steven Seidman describes the way that the gay figure has come out in American society since the nineteen nineties as a figure who is no longer portrayed as a complete monster but now someone who is normal.

The normal gay is presented as fully human, as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual. Accordingly, gays should be integrated into America as rights-bearing, respected citizens.

However, the normal gay also serves as a narrow social norm. This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviors...Only gays who conform to dominant social norms deserve respect and integration. Lesbians and gay men who are gender benders or choose alternative intimate lives will likely remain outsiders. And, as we see, the normal gay implies a political logic of tolerance and minority rights that does not challenge heterosexual dominance.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Personal communication, March 2, 2010.

¹³⁹ Seidman, Steven. 2005. From the polluted homosexual to the normal gay: Changing patterns of sexual regulation in america In *Thinking straight: The power, the promise, and the paradox of heterosexuality.*, ed. Chrys Ingraham. New York: Routledge, 45.

As Seidman's depiction of the "normal gay" demonstrates, accepting people as gay gives them a name and a place within the heterosexual social order. Making gay normal does not make it normal to be gay or to have same-sex romantic partnerships or sexual-relations, it just means that someone can be gay and still be normal in every other way. This "tolerance" fits gayness into the heterosexual order by making it a recognized exception to the rule. The act of creating an identity for homosexuality as the direct opposite heterosexuality, helps incorporate the deviant sexual form of gayness by acknowledging it as something lesser, a minority that must be given privileges and recognized in ways that heterosexuals already are. Instead of breaking down the heterosexual order, the "normal gay" bolsters that order. Jan Muller in a formal interview at her office described how this heterosexual privilege demands that LGBT folks fight for the rights and recognition: "It takes excessive time and money...to get a few basic rights and you have to fight like hell for those...Why should you have to fight for things that's already granted to you by the state?"¹⁴⁰ The efforts Jan described that LGBT individuals must go through to gain legitimacy show how ideologies integrate into the regulatory structures, which keep those ideologies in tact. The normal gay, an inferior minority group, gets written into laws, policies, and everyday order. Thus, the principle that it is important to come out as gay works in conjunction with the forces that create a dominant heterosexual order.

Since labels like "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," and "transgender" enforce regulatory regimes and create limitations for the labeled individual, there has been a recent shift in preferred language. At the LGBT Ally Training I attended, the leaders explained that more and more students have been drawn to identify with the term "queer." "Queer" was once used as a hateful word against all non-heterosexual individuals, but recently people have begun

¹⁴⁰ Jan Muller, formal interview, October 20, 2009.

reclaim “queer” as a positive word. “Queer” is connected to the idea of non-conformity and is often used as gender-queer to indicate people who do not choose to conform to the male-female polarity that they see as socially constructed. “Queer” is also used more generally to mean non-normative, so claiming to be queer is a less constricted sexual and/or gender identity. “I’m queer” is like saying “I am a non-conformist.” Rather than constricting an individual, it opens up their possibilities. It is also a term that focuses on the individual’s decision to go against the grain rather (a respected act in this individualistic society) instead of focusing on what an individual is intrinsically. This focus on actions not essence has fewer presumptions attached. As Fran Sawyer said so clearly, “Being out shouldn’t matter, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t. We’re so obsessed with what everybody is.”¹⁴¹ Embracing the term “queer” is a rejection of this identity-based understanding of sexuality. However, it is important to note that in order for the idea of general queerness to have an effect that counters the heterosexual order requires a general knowledge of this lexical discourse. So while claiming to identify as “queer” may help the individual avoid constricting labels, ultimately everyone who is unfamiliar with the discourse will categorize in the group of the “normal gay.”

“Queer” is meant to be a vague term that rejects the specificity of the labeling system, the LGBTQAIS alphabet soup that “lesbian and gay” has grown into. As a vague term, “queer” conflates all categories into one larger family, which hides the sexuality-gender divide that is so hailed within American society. In an essay called *Sex, Heterosexuality, and Gender Hierarchy*, Stevi Jackson explains the distinction between gender and sexuality. Gender, he claims, is based off of a two-way divide; male is arbitrarily defined as the opposite of female and vice versa. Sexuality on the other hand “a broader term referring to all

¹⁴¹ Fran Sawyer, formal interview, December 1, 2009.

erotically significant aspects of social life and social being.”¹⁴² As a result, “femininity and masculinity are defined as ‘natural’ and heterosexuality is privileged as the only ‘normal’ and legitimate form of sexuality.”¹⁴³ Essentially, the heterosexual norm controls notions of gender and sexuality, defining gender by the opposition of male and female and asserting that sexuality can only be understood through two possibilities based off of this gender opposition (same-sex or opposite-sex attraction). Of course within the heterosexual norm, “gender” and “sex” have become one and the same thing. According to Jackson’s argument, the heterosexual norm connects gender and sexuality and implements an understanding of sexuality only through this polarized gender order (you are either man or woman and you like either a man or a woman). This order blurs the distinction between sexuality and gender as their own separate entities. Jackson articulates the relationship quite eloquently in this passage:

Heterosexuality is the key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, and one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and nonsexual aspects of social life. As an institution, heterosexuality includes nonsexual elements implicated in ordering wider gender relations and ordered by them. As I have noted elsewhere, it entails who washed the sheets as well as what goes on between them. Thus heterosexuality is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality. While heterosexual desires, practices, and relations are socially defined as “normal” and normative, serving to marginalize other sexualities as abnormal and deviant, the coercive power of compulsory heterosexuality derives from its institutionalization as more than merely a sexual relation.¹⁴⁴

Jackson has laid out the intricacies of the discussion of gender and sexuality within a dominant heterosexual order. These intricacies are important to everyone trying to figure out their own identities in relation to the heterosexual norm. They are also necessary for cutting back at that norm. But the idea of queerness loses these intricacies. In its conflation of all

¹⁴² Jackson, Stevi. 2005. Sexuality, heterosexuality, and gender hierarchy: Getting our priorities straight In *Thinking straight: The power, promise and paradox of heterosexuality.*, ed. Chrys Ingraham. New York: Routledge, 17.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.,17-18.

categories into one blanket concept, queerness reflects the lack ability to describe the complex relations sexuality and gender can have in minds and bodies. Sexual repression and privacy manifests in the American vocabulary, providing very few words for talking about sex and gender. So while we obsess about categorizing identities, the terms for describing the numerous gender-sexual possibilities are limited. In our lack of words, Americans are confused about gender and sexuality. This confusion reinforces the dominant heterosexual order because it creates one broad category as “other” in opposition to what is normal. Thus, gender polarized heterosexuality remains the superior form of gender and sexuality instead of being just one of many options. Queerness as other to heterosexuality, undermines the possibilities of gender and sexuality because it conforms to male-female opposite understanding of both. Queerness as a theory for gender can only work against the heterosexual norm by including everyone as naturally queer. So far it has not yet made the leap from the level of theory to that of everyday practice and the heterosexual norm still dominates with a space of exceptions for LGBT-identified others.

II. Imagining Identity

An important component of identity is what one imagines what one would like to be. This idealized version of the self is a fantasy based in desire. David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* describes his ethnography work with various New York City transgender support groups. The main focus of his book is about what it means to create the category transgender. Valentine found that the conditions affecting people’s gender identity were much more complex than his guidelines for identifying people as transgender could predict. He found labeling people as transgender often made matters more complicated because their

understanding of themselves could differ from the way they seem to others. For instance one interviewee Anita told Valentine that she identified as a drag queen but that she treated herself as a woman all the time. Anita did not know the term transgender and she did not identify as transsexual, which she knew to mean “a sex change.” When Valentine noticed the incongruence between his definition of transgender and Anita’s claimed identity, she told him emphatically “I know what I am... you know I treat myself like a woman, I move like a woman... everything like a woman.” But soon after she described herself as “gay,” causing more confusion. She lived as a woman, but she said “I know I’m gay and I know I’m a man.”¹⁴⁵ Anita was a complicated individual for Valentine to wrap his mind around because her understanding of her own gender made it impossible for him to neatly package her up in his category of transgender, though she was not entirely outside the category. The problem arises from a gap between what Anita knows to be true about herself and the collective precincts of her social identity. This dissonance is further complicated for individuals who move back and forth between different physical embodiments of male and female, such as dressing up as a woman everyday but taking off those clothes at night and looking more like a man.

In my own research, I have found similar contradictions between what people say about themselves and what I would like to classify them as. One particularly informative evening was the time when I interviewed Clair Krug. Claire is one of the BVD’s at Drag Bingo and I met with her at Flex Nightclub. She came fully dressed in women’s clothes and took me into the dressing room so we could talk while she put on her makeup. At the beginning of our interview, I asked Clair if she identified as transgender. She simply said

¹⁴⁵ Valentine, David, 1966-. *Imagining transgender : An ethnography of a category* Durham : Duke University Press, 2007, 114-115.

“yes,” as if saying ‘of course I am.’ It seemed that there was no doubt in her mind about what she was so I wrote it down and moved on. But during the rest of the interview the complexity of Clair’s gender identity bubbled to the surface.

About a minute into the interview, I wanted to know about Clair’s childhood to understand how she had become what I interpreted as an adult transwoman. “When I was a little girl...” she began, laughing and commenting on how she thought of herself as a little girl. “When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a celebrity.” Later in the interview she referred to her current female self as “a celebrity.” Clair also described little girl Clair as someone who did not quite fit as either male or female, but someone who had elements of both. She said “I had different thinking than women and men; I saw both sides.”

Later in the interview, I discovered that Clair had dual identities as Clair-in-drag and Clair-in-men’s-clothes and that her concept of self was highly dependent on her attire. “I look like a boy when I go to work [at Whole Foods]. Some features are kind of hard to hide. But I used to bartend, and I bartended as me [as a girl], looking like this.” Eventually, Clair explained that as a boy sometimes her personality was different. She tended to be more reserved and less comfortable doing and saying anything, acting out what she seemed to believe was her truer nature. “As a boy I’m a nerd. I wear glasses and have short hair. I read a lot. This is more glamorous. It’s like a character you put on... I still talk and act the same but I don’t look the same. It’s much more comfortable if I talk and act like this if I look like this,” she said. From this comment, I conclude that the girl version and the boy version of Clair are two performances of one identity, contingent on the way she is dressed. In other words, it is not that Clair sometimes feels she is a girl and sometimes feels she is a boy depending on what she is wearing. Instead, it is that Clair is the same person wearing

different clothes and so the interaction she has with others changes because of the differences they read of her appearance. Thus, her actions change in these contexts.

In one of her concluding remarks, Clair said, “Most people would say I was a gay male but what you look like and what you feel inside aren’t the same thing.” With this comment, Clair engages in the inner versus outer dialogue surrounding transgenderism in contemporary American society. Yet, she never said ‘I am a woman and I want people to see me that way.’ Her interview told that Clair is not really just a man or a woman. Her appearance alternates between these two categories, but her identity is more complex than that.

The more I have talked with people about what it means to be transgender, the more I have learned that transgender is category of vast differences complicated by multi-layered social roles and desires. While everyone seems to imagine a simplistic model for transgender (I am a man trapped in a woman’s body or vice versa), transgenderism is actually a complex system of desire. Everyone’s identity is in part based on an imagined, fantasized version of the self, but when it comes to the category of transgender, the individual’s concept of self tends to have more contradictions between these desires and the individual’s identification within society. For someone who falls loosely into the category of transgender, it is more difficult to realize fantasized versions of the self because that fantasy tends to be at great odds with the social categories in which he or she is constantly placed.

Being male or being female is not the basic intrinsic property that it is construed as. Maleness and femaleness are decorated by the shifting constructions of personality. As such one might go so far as to question whether or not maleness and femaleness are even real properties that are empirically based, not arbitrarily assigned to various expressions. Imagine

the way certain languages assign masculinity and femininity to inanimate objects that can stand alone from human beings. In French, *pencil* is masculine but *shoe* is feminine. Without a social context, there is nothing intrinsically masculine about a pencil or feminine about a shoe. There is no way to know that the pen could symbolize writing, which may once have been thought of as a job for men, and that the shoe might symbolize fashion which is in the realm of women. These concepts depend on a social understanding of what behaviors are appropriate for men and for women.

Americans tend to conceive of gender through the lens of this sex binary because we see men and women as clearly and fundamentally opposite entities. We tend to believe that all of the properties of men exist in one isolated sphere from the properties of women. But there is no perfect man or woman off of which to base our concepts of male and female and so we arbitrarily begin to assign masculinity and femininity to a whole collection of different things that people do. Consequently, gender gets entangled with all the complex things that people think make them who they are. While we envision that gender is about two opposite possibilities, really it is a web of individual experiences that constitute an imagined understanding of the self in relation to the perceived norms.

The stories people tell about themselves become the fabric of their identity, reflecting what they would like themselves to be. People remember these events in a favorable and significant way, imagining themselves to be well captured by these stories. Clair liked to think of herself as truly unique. “People probably think I’m a special needs person, because I sing and dance to myself like I’m the show,” she told me lightly. She then launched into a story about how she went out walking in the pouring rain [not in drag]. Apparently, Clair was listening to her iPod, to the song “Walking On Sunshine” – the Dolly Parton version-- and

was dancing and laughing to herself, oblivious to the people around her. A homeless woman who “needed to be in an institution or medicated” was standing by where Clair liked to walk. The woman typically asked for money, but on this particular day she shook her head and walked off. “She was pointing her finger and crossing [her arms] at me like I was crazier than she was!”¹⁴⁶

We were talking about her gender identity, but Clair kept expressing her individuality. But her story about the homeless woman thinking she was crazy was about Clair’s performance of self. Performance of gender tends to be described as a mandatory, ritualistic type of performance that people learn early in life and maintain forever. But Clair’s performance was more about her own creativity within that pool of expectations.

When I asked Clair questions about her gender, Clair just talked about painting her self-portrait while I wrote furiously. Each thing she said would remind her of something else. She was weaving together a gender identity from various elements of her own and other perceptions of her. For example, she said:

Even my mother calls me she. [*Me: Even when you were little?*] No, not when I was little. When I was little she called me Little Clair, then Sunny. A lot of people called me sunny, and I liked it because it reflected my sunny personality, but I didn’t associate it with Sonny and Cher. Clair really is the perfect name for me, because I love Cher and Clair and Cher sound the same. [Laughs] My mother is 77. I was conceived on New Years Eve. My parents forgot to use a rubber, but that’s great because I’m a Dragon and I’m also a Libra. They were in college when I was born. I’m almost fifty years old. I lie about my age because I want people to think I look young. I’m only forty-five. I was born in 1964. People think I’m older, so when I tell them I’m fifty they say I don’t look fifty. I like to eat healthy. The only meat I eat is chicken, once in a while, and I don’t eat too much. My favorite food is a peanut butter fold over. Do you know what that is?

It was a piece of bread with peanut butter on it and folded in half. And it was a part of the identity Clair was creating for me. Later she divulged how through clothing she created her identity for others.

¹⁴⁶ Clair Krug, formal interview, November 19, 2009.

I look bigger with layers. I like it because they have no idea that I look this way. It adds to the mystery of who you are. It sounds like I don't feel comfortable as a boy. [pauses] If I were sitting here as a boy, I wouldn't be talking to you. I'm private – a private person. I like a little space and private time, too. It's not anybody's business that I like to read about mysteries and serial killers, but it just adds to the mystery of your life. The general public thinks I'm a partyer all the time because I'm a celebrity. I went to Walmart [dressed as a man] and a customer from Dunkin Donuts came running 'Clair! Clair!' and that was scary because everyone needs their own private time. I still have feelings I need to keep to myself.

Dressing as a woman is one way Clair can make herself. She acts on what she desires to be.

Though no one can completely become the perfect fantasized self, we can and do alter the way we are interpreted publicly bringing us closer to the self we imagine we are. Dressing up is a creative and expressive act. That creativity is enhanced through consumerism.



“There’s only one Clair” courtesy of Drag Bingo http://www.dragbingo.com/02a_Calendar.html

III. Consuming Categories

In order to understand the processes of American gender, it is also important to look at the way economics shape culture. Perhaps the greatest influence on contemporary

American culture is the highly erotic experience of late-stage capitalism, described by the mass production and consumption of goods and services. In chapter 2, I discussed Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism: people are alienated from their labor under capitalism and so seek fulfillment in animated material goods, the products of labor whose power is an illusory replacement for the felt lack. People who follow Marx see capitalism as merely alienating, as a system that only subtracts from the self. However, others argue that capitalism can be productive and can enhance the self's creative possibilities.

Through its endless advertisements for shiny new products, capitalism creates, shapes, and amplifies desires, but these new desires do not necessarily have to be the soul-sucking menace that Marx describes. Rather late-stage capitalism can generate new possibilities for experiencing pleasure. While a sports car may be a way to feel better about the alienating conditions of one's labor, its animated quality is not completely a mirage. The sports car is cool. It is bright red. It drives fast and smoothly. It makes cool noises. The interior is covered with beautiful soft leather. The car inspires awe. It makes us say 'Wow! Can you believe that human beings have learned to make that?' And regardless of the conditions of labor and production within which the car was produced, this commodity can be generative. The car can produce pleasure, stimulate the senses, and inspire our brain with images and ideas we had never thought of before. Well-designed commodities display the creative possibilities of the mind of the person or people who engineered them. Within commercialism, commodities become representations of gender. In our choices as consumers, we make investments in objects that can display our masculinity or femininity, like the flashy sports car. However, the car's message is not always straightforward. Unlike a Marxist perspective, in consumerism, people are not completely governed by commodities or

direct commercial messages. While mass media does shape people's perceptions of gender, these people are not passive receivers of media messages. Ultimately, as consumers they have choices and can use commodities in order to construct their gender creatively.

In *The Body In Late Capitalist USA*, Donald Lowe describes the intersection of consumption and sexuality in American capitalist society and its impact on binary gender. Lowe engages with Butler's argument that binary gender and heterosexuality are enforced through regulatory social discourses, which police desire and naturalize a biological understanding of gender.¹⁴⁷ His claim is that that the system of social reproduction that Butler describes has collapsed in late-stage capitalism as sexuality has morphed "from a disciplinary to a consumptuary phenomenon."¹⁴⁸ Lowe's model describes a notion of a flexible "sexual lifestyle" rather than a fixed concept of sexual identity. By this view, in capitalism the sexual subject is liberated from the confines of categorization and the inner/outer, public/private, and heterosexual/homosexual oppositions with dissolve. Lowe believes that the wide range of images and products in the capitalist market allows for a looser construction of sexual order based on a multitude of possible lifestyles rather than a few discrete identity categories, allowing American culture to approach a "polysexuality" based on "sexual differences without stable identities."¹⁴⁹

Alongside these trends, new technologies have been developed within capitalism, which facilitate new sexual lifestyles. For example, in vitro fertilization enables people to reproduce outside of marriage, thus separating their sex life from biological function. The result is a change in the nature of the family, from that only one man, one woman, and children to a wider array. Closely resembling this standard view of the family, lesbian

¹⁴⁷ Lowe, Donald M. *The body in late-capitalist USA* Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 1995, 124.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 127, 137.

couples can now give birth through anonymous sperm donations and gay male couples can use one partner's sperm to fertilize the eggs of a surrogate mother who will carry their child. Likewise these options are available to single mothers and single fathers. In Kortney Ryan Zielger's documentary film "Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen," one interviewee, a transman (ftm) had donated his egg to be fertilized by a sperm donor and then the embryo was carried by his "wife."¹⁵⁰ Conversely, a myriad of contraceptive methods allows people to have active sex lives outside of reproductive family situations. People can and are sometimes even expected to have casual sexual relationships without a thought of marriage, a family, or even a future together.¹⁵¹ According to Lowe these technologies have developed as the result of consumer demands to be able to have these lifestyles, suggesting that beneath their repressed socialization Americans have always had Freudian desires for non-heteronormative erotic possibility. Commercial products, however, also contribute to these desires, giving consumers the opportunity to stretch their imaginations beyond what they would have been capable of otherwise.

When I spoke with Jan Muller at her office at the Alliance, she told me about a friend of hers who was in a three-way committed and exclusive relationship. This man had two sexual partners, one a woman and the other another man. Jan told me that "the three of them went everywhere together" and the relationship was happy and wholesome for all three. "I'm not to say that's wrong," she said. "As long as everyone knows about it and everyone is okay with it, I don't see any harm in relationships with multiple people."¹⁵² This happy three-some whom Jan described certainly represents both an alternative sexual lifestyle and family unit.

¹⁵⁰ Ziegler, Kortney Ryan. 2008. *Still black: A portrait of black transmen*, ed. Awilda Rodriguez Lora. Vol. Documentary.

¹⁵¹ Lowe., 131.

¹⁵² Jan Muller, formal interview, October 20, 2009.

But what specifically about capitalism makes their nontraditional relationship possible? According to Lowe, in early industrial capitalism, gender emerged as a universal category, causing the concept of sexuality to develop as “a separate, though related discursive reality.”

He further argued:

Other social formations [other than a bourgeois capitalist order]... do not discursively order sex in terms of a heterosexual/homosexual polarity. Therefore, what we often assume to be the norms in regard to gender and sexuality are really quite exceptional – specific and peculiar to only the capitalist social formations. And they are now undergoing changes.¹⁵³

In late-stage capitalism, the polymorphous eroticization of nearly everything destabilizes the interrelations of gender and sexuality, ultimately causing bipolar sexuality, as Lowe puts it, “to be under assault.” Thus, new sexual life styles and romantic unions can arise within the space of this disconnect. But this shift has not yet been fully recognized in the way American society treats sexual identity. As a prime example, the terms of LGBT (lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transsexual), the four main identities that fall outside of the heterosexual norm, are still fundamentally based off of the binary gender concept.

L: a female who is sexually attracted to females
G: a male who is sexual attracted to other males
B: a person (male or female) who is attracted to both male and females
T: a person whose expressed gender (male or female) differs from his/her assigned gender

This gender-conditional concept for sexual identity is slowly beginning to change. Like the use of “queer” to describe a person’s non-binary gender, people have begun to use “pansexual” to replace bisexual as a broader term that indicates a gender-blind attraction to people.¹⁵⁴ Though it will be a long while, if ever, before American sexuality becomes based on genderless attraction. However, the stark gender divide between males and females has been noticeably weakened in late-stage capitalism. A primary example is the way the

¹⁵³ Lowe, 139.

¹⁵⁴ Personal communication, March 2, 2009.

division of labor has vastly shifted towards gender neutrality as many women have entered the workforce and men have entered the domestic realm. During an interview at the local high school the North Carolina School for Science and Math, Kevin, an administrator, discussed the connection between the family and work along lines of gender. He said, “Social roles are starting to blur some... For my parents thirty years ago, it wasn’t common for both parents to work. I personally have taken paternity leave.” After a pause, he added, “There is extra-emphasis on the importance of family in the workplace, nowadays.” Kevin’s last point describes the high concern for building strong families even while women are contributing members of the workforce. The emphasis on strong families causes policy makers to compromise the when it comes to male supremacy, such as through providing gender equal benefits and opportunities. This greater gender neutrality in the workplace in turn facilitates non-traditional gender-independent family situations at home.

The idea of capitalist produced desire is related to the visual culture of gayness. When I interviewed Mary K. Mart, she mentioned the important visual role that commodities play in the formation of gay community: “So much of the gay community is all about the flashy new gadgets. It’s all about perception. In order to fit in, you have to have this stuff.” These “gadgets” are related to a culture of gayness rooted in pride and the ability to be visibly gay. Mary K. Mart described this as a response to anti-gay discrimination saying that being flamboyant “is to make gay a positive.” This positive visibility is strengthened in a system of capitalism, in which shiny commodities decorate this brand of identity. Lowe asserts that this visible consumption has effectively transformed “gay identity” into “gay lifestyle” with an increasing focus on fashion, theater, holidays, restaurant, cosmetics, and household

products.¹⁵⁵ However, while this emerging emphasis on lifestyle allows for more flexible state of gayness, I cannot agree that these decorated gay bodies are free from the discursive formation of identity. Judith Butler would argue that connecting certain images and products to gayness highlights the performance of gay identity and shows that the commodities are creating a fixed category of gayness. In other words, one sees a man sporting certain gay-lifestyle products and automatically assumes he is gay. But that is also not totally what we see. Due to the mass consumption of a high variety of products, we actually see a blending of the various images that get produced with less strict limits on who can wear and own what. Further, as society becomes safer for gay visibility, it presents a wider array of ways people have expressed gayness, than one flamboyant, stereotypically gay personality. While the gay-lifestyle products may suggest ideological values, they can have multi-layered meaning, that constantly changes with fashion. Thus, the ubiquity of commodities blurs the boundaries of exclusive identity categories. It makes us unsure of what we see. This process allows people more freedom in how they represent themselves, because we cannot always tell the difference between what is gay and what is just trendy.

However, there is also an interesting relationship between the expression of individuality and the need to conform. While indeed there are products everywhere, there is a great deal of uniformity on a national level. For example, you can find some variation of the same 15 clothing stores across the country, and even in their subtly different niche markets, they all sell a relatively similar set of products. What Americans perceived to be an abundant variety of choices, is really a lot of sameness. Furthermore, there is a common set of rules that Americans already share about appearance, such as the requisite wearing of shoes in most public places or the idea that it is perfectly normal for a man –but not a woman- to be

¹⁵⁵ Lowe, 195.

seen without a shirt. Besides this relative sameness, American consumers tend to obsess about making the body look a certain way. This self-regulated and somewhat self-produced body image is a construct of self-expression and of social conformity. It is a representation of the inner self and the desire to stand out as a unique individual. It is also a reaction to the media-driven fear of not fitting in. These desires are not completely opposite in aim, because standing out is another way of fitting in, by appearing cool and gaining acceptance. Standing out is still a bow to consumption and conformity, just that of a different brand. The strong pull to fit into American society controls other desires, keeping them in check when they stray too far from social norms. In a chapter about contemporary patterns of gender, it is important to mention the effect of America's current economic depression. When the economy is this bad, everyone's fears are elevated and the body is subject to ultra-regulation. At such a time, pressure to fit in is most intense because the consequences seem disastrous.

IV. Connectivity

The following quote is from an editorial arguing in favor of gay marriage on the website of the North Carolina Gay Advocacy Legal Alliance (NCGALA):

On policy grounds, we find the main argument in favor convincing. That is, marriage is a fundamental and mostly beneficial social institution. If more people engage in it, that is to the good. And we find the main argument against gay marriage, that recognition would encourage the "choice" of a homosexual "lifestyle" utterly unconvincing. This statement extends to the children raised by such unions. We know of no empirical data that supports the notion that gay and lesbian parents in committed relationships raise gay and lesbian children in different proportions than anyone else. There is no evidence we find credible that sexual orientation is chosen at all. Showing respect for gays and lesbians will not predictably create either more or fewer gays and lesbians. It may well allow more to come out of the closet. But the

closeted state is an incredibly destructive thing, both for those who lie and for those who are lied to.¹⁵⁶

This statement contains several elements of contemporary American ideology that relate the major question of this chapter: where are we in terms of de-normalizing gender? The first key point is about the institution of marriage. There is a nationwide campaign to push for the right to gay marriage. A significant portion of Americans not only want to get married, but also find marriage a highly valuable tool of civic order and enrichment. All ten of the people with whom I conducted formal interviews unanimously agreed that marriage is a positive institution in society, despite high divorce rates, prohibition against same-sex marriage (and most of my interviewees did not identify as heterosexual), and unequal (and perhaps undeserved) privileges for married couples.

Second, this statement contains the idea that some people view sexuality (hetero/homo) as a *lifestyle choice*, not as a pre-determined genetic condition or fixed, pre-social internal essence. Perhaps people are recognizing Donald Lowe's point that we are moving towards a lifestyle-based concept of sexuality. However, that thinking, when used for the purposes of discriminating legislation, forces LGBT-identified folks to claim the reverse, that their sexuality is in fact a fixed identity that they were born with. Certainly, sexual desires can be uncontrollable, but they can also change. As described at length in this thesis, identity is based off of social interaction and cannot exist pre-socially. It is understandable that LGBT folks would defend their identity this way, because the claim that they could simply choose to not be gay is utterly demeaning to someone who considers being gay an important part of their personhood. Yet, their defense still causes a backlash in defining gay and lesbian identity as completely internal and static.

¹⁵⁶ Asti, Alison L., et. al. Opinion - gay marriage. in Maryland Daily Record Editorial Advisory Board [database online]. Available from http://ncgala.org/press/opinion_gay_marriage.htm (accessed March 29, 2010).

Third, this statement tells the story of out-ness. Today there is widespread awareness of and hypersensitivity to LGBT identities. Given this awareness, LGBT visible cultures are much more out, though still marginal and non-normative. It seems that LGBT folks have poured out into the open in the last few decades. First it happened with gay and lesbian people since probably the 1960s. Now it is happening largely with people who are transgender. “My attitude has changed because you didn’t used to know what trans was until recently; we’ve had talks about it [at work],” Rodessa said explaining even as a gay man and drag queen her changing levels of awareness about transgenderism.¹⁵⁷ The next few years will likely see the rise of new populations like the P’s for pansexual people, the Q’s for queer people, and the I’s for intersex people. Surprisingly, many of my savvy LGBT-identified respondents (Mary, Rodessa, Chris, Jan, & Brian) constantly describe these emerging minorities as people who have always been there, but they were just oppressed, closeted, and invisible. Mary K. Mart said, “I think they’ve always been around but the names of them are now available as part of the American vocabulary.” Mary’s quote describe the way we now have official concepts and identity categories for what was merely perverse desire or feelings that you were different. As a result, many people are compelled to come out when they see and learn about these possibility identities and recognize that ‘that could be me.’ This LGBT awareness is beneficial in that it lowers sexual repression and limitations for what is considered sexual intercourse. It also provides a supportive infrastructure of clubs, activist groups, seminars, and LGBT allies. LGBT folks can now be recognized with lower discrimination that in say the 1980s. Awareness can also help create structural changes, which increase both friendliness and visibility in the long run. However, the process of

¹⁵⁷ Rodessa Rodehard, formal interview, October 13, 2009.

fighting for this respectability reinforces heterosexual dominance by blatantly advertising the *need* to fight for it since it is not natural or inalienable.

Despite general increased awareness, transgenderism is less understood. Transgender individuals are also subject to much harsher realities of physical regulation because their gender is not a private matter, but something that is displayed on the body and is still quite disruptive of hegemonic order. Because sexual behavior is a private matter, LGB folks can pass as normal not disturbing civic functions. Transgender folks, on the other hand, must face severe discrimination (inability to have a driver's license, to travel by plane, or to use the restroom in public). Jan even told me about how a transitioning male-to-female was unable to attend a Triangle Community Works meeting of gay and transgender people. Jan was helping to run the meeting. "I got an email from someone who wanted to come but was afraid of the library people and the metal detectors," she reported. This scenario demonstrates the serious ostracism many transgender folks experience on a daily basis, because of the degree to which their identity disrupts everyday processes. Yet, the fact that they can begin to emerge is progress. When I asked people if they thought the US was changing its ways, they told me that on the one hand we still have a very long way to go, but on the other hand, look how far we have come in just the last 10-20 years. There is now an interest in defending the rights of more groups of people, even those beyond who have previously been defined as men and women. I find transgenderism particularly interesting because of its liminal position between invisibility and visibility. While there is greater public awareness and support for people who want to change their bodies to portray a gender not defined by their birth certificate, the idea of transgender visibility can be a slippery slope. Prosser's concept of the transgender identity narrative highlights how the process of transitioning is actually an important part of

transgender identity, that the history of transitioning between genders becomes a second skin. In fact, all the individuals who fit loosely into the category of transgender are unique from other males and females, because they pass temporally between the boundaries of the gender camps in appearance and social role. Like being out as gay, it is important for these individuals to have the resources and support to be able to make the transitions they seek. Yet post-transition, being ‘outed’ as transgender can be unwelcome because it is important to be seen solely according to the gender you dress and act as, the gender you want to be and feel that you are. Thus, post transitional transgender is fundamentally not queer and it conceals the liminal, non-binary gender role of the trans-person.

Nevertheless, the increasing awareness and protection of transgender personhood confronts the gender binary. It causes us to recognize the socio-cultural constructs that govern us, allowing us to step back and examine the idea of male-and-femaleness, to poke and prod at the idea that gender is a consistent, pre-cultural phenomenon. Transgender awareness, like with other gender blending and bending, begins as a shocking encounter, such as with Jan Muller’s friend who was so startled by her inability to discern the gender of any of a group of gender blended youngsters, or the people who gaped at Brian and his friends as they paraded around South Point Mall wildly dressed in drag. Brian told me about how he liked to stir up gender norms just to spark that reaction from people.

I’m in your face. I’d probably go just about anywhere [in drag]. Some friends of mine were getting ready to move, a married heterosexual couple. It was Elizabeth’s* thirty-ninth birthday party and me and two friends came in full drag, kidnapped her and her husband, put them in drag, and took them on a scavenger hunt all over Durham. There were some things at South Point. We had a huge following. It was hilarious. People were taking pictures of us. That response is part of why I enjoy doing drag. It’s not political, just sort of

* Name has been changed.

upending gender expectations. Why does it bother you? So what if you see a drag queen at South Point!¹⁵⁸

These basic encounters with gender transgression, like the onlookers at South Point Mall would experience, are how I was turned onto this thesis topic. When I chose to write about this topic, I was peripherally aware of such transgressions and the interest to learn more was growing inside of me. I had learned about drag queens through popular culture with the movie *Kinky Boots* and the situational comedy television series *Noah's Arc*. A member of the church congregation I belonged to in high school underwent a transition from female to male, which I observed gradually along with the somewhat judgmental curiosity of my family. I also met a peer who had transitioned from female to male who was a friend of one of my close friends in college. I had watched a television that showed me the harm of assigning gender to intersex people at birth. These few encounters made me intellectually curious about the changing nature of gender.



Drawings on the table cloths at Drag Bingo made with daubers, www.dragbingo.com/

Such early encounters strain gender norms and the naturalized concepts of binary gender. Then as people eventually grow accustomed to gender transition and it becomes a mainstream concept as is currently taking place, ordinary people can begin to informally discuss the nature of American gender. Ultimately, as common notions of gender flow in new directions, regulatory structure policies of gender will change. New discussions about gender

¹⁵⁸ Brian Denton, formal interview, November 23, 2009.

and sexuality are taking place, both informally and in academic forums. Furthermore, the Internet has become a major conduit of binary gender invisibility, awareness about and connectivity of non-hetero-normatively, and a place of new queer niches. Blogs like *Pam's House Blend* allow anyone to anonymously discuss gender identity in this virtual space, a place where gender becomes something that can be created from imagination. Online, people can create avatars with alternative identities and through these avatars they can connect with and relate to others in unforeseen ways. The safety of online anonymity makes the Internet a site of rule breaking, gender bending, and gender removal.

So are we moving towards a less bipolar view of gender? Well that is a complicated question that deserves a complicated answer.

Ultimately, in the physical and public American society, categories like LGBT reinforce the heterosexual norm and the gender binary. Policies and procedure do regulate the way human beings can express gender on their physical bodies. The coming out saga places sexual and gender minorities on the margins of normalcy, causing them to fight to gain the same rights and privileges as wealthy, white, heterosexual people. Heterosexual power dominance pervades most aspects of formal social organization: schools, work, transportation, etc. LGBT advocacy glues sexual behavior and lifestyle to stable identity categorization.

Nevertheless, the early twenty-first century United States has become a land of vast possibility when it comes to gender and sexual identity. The super-visible commoditization of identity, greater awareness of non-normative forms of identity, virtual identity recreation and recombinant gender connectivity pull down on the heteronorm. We can begin to see heterosexuality as one of multiple sex-gender options. Like an expensive brand-name

commodity, heterosexuality still dominates the sex-gender market, but we can begin to see that a few shelves below there are other options. Today, events like Drag Bingo are able to exist within the sphere of legitimate bourgeois recognition. All of these new possibilities prime Americans for new, more flexible understandings of sexuality and gender performance, as behavioral, lifestyle-oriented, and polymorphous. As such sexuality and gender become disentangled from each other and the heterosexual norm begins to crumble. Rather than a “tight chemise” that we cannot remove or even see because it is so embedded in our concepts of the self, gender becomes a cloak to fit the occasion.¹⁵⁹

Both a cause and effect of more flexible gender, Americans’ social roles are becoming less gender-defined in certain institutional and community spheres with the rise of a more unisex environment at work and in the home. However, the more unisex territories strangely tend to fall in places of power and privilege, where other social advantages reduce the pressure to conform. Thus, the breakdown of male-dominated hierarchy at the structural level tends to start with those who have the power to enact changes: the white and wealthy. In the long-run, this hierarchically distributed change can trickle down to those who are less empowered because it confronts the gender binary at its root, where the standards for gender standard get created in the first place.

A byproduct of this more unisex social standard is the reorganization of the family. The American family is becoming a whole new entity with more combinations than just man and wife and where recombinant gender roles penetrate the home. With new familial forms, gender can evolve gradually through the generations.

¹⁵⁹ Hurston, 1.

While gender *roles* are becoming more blurred, males and females at this point are still viewed as natural opposites and most people have not yet been able to conceive of the self as inseparable from the male-female dichotomy. Consequently, gender-blended-ness still tends to be shocking and provocative. Its mind-blowing effect disturbs gender norms in a way that people benefit from. Even with the felt safety of social reproduction and stability, people appear to desire to push back at the regulatory structures of their lives once in awhile. So, America is not yet ready to view gender as multifarious. But down the road, the new sexual lifestyles, numerous possible family arrangements, unisex social roles, and increasing visibility and awareness of “other” sex and gender identities can make space for more fluid understandings of gender.

Conclusion

Drag is an experience that inverts gender norms, causing people to question the naturalness of gendered behavior, to see the performativity of gender, and to imagine new possibilities for expressing gender. Drag allows people to push back at social regulation and engage in a fantasy in which gender is temporarily unusual. At the same time, drag is conservative in its imitation of performed gender norms. Drag is also highly commodified, which has multiple implications. On the one hand, drag is a classed experience that requires money and is thus a discernible boundary of class ideology. This requisite money also reinforces the power of consumerism over the building of the self, a basis for gender conformity. On the other hand, the commodification of drag generates more possibilities for the self, celebrating versatility and momentarily evading regulation.

The experience of Drag Bingo is subversive, transformative, and counter hegemonic while also being conservative, commodified, and regular. Its work depends on time, perspective, and scale. Sometimes it subverts gender norms, other times it reinforces them. For some people it is a means of reconceptualizing gender, for others it is a way to accommodate divergence back into normative schemes. For the individual it can be transformative, but for society its work is small. Drag Bingo is popular success in a community where race and class tensions and the presence of a powerful university condition gender and sexuality through fear and restriction. But amidst this environment, Drag Bingo offers a space to visibly test gender regulation and to examine the social construction of gender in the community space. Ultimately, Drag Bingo works between the familiar and the strange, much like myself as an anthropologist who constantly moving back and forth between seeing with new and accustomed eyes. By articulating the complexities between the

familiar and the strange, Drag Bingo provides an opportunity for people to think differently about gender.

Drag Bingo is not a vehicle of radical social change. It does not threaten to demolish society's pre-existing organization of gender and sexuality. Rather Drag Bingo temporarily subverts normalizing social rules. It is a place of imagination, fantasy, and creative possibility for the self. It is a place where non-normative gender is visible, urging individuals to examine their own naturalized concepts of gender. Drag Bingo does not change society as a whole, but it opens up conversation at the level of the individual and the family. Drag Bingo makes people understand gender and sexuality in ways that breach the regulatory barriers of our social institutions. It is a way for people to understand and cope with divergence from gender and sexual norms. It is a way for people to push back at the regulatory regimes that act on their own bodies. It is a place for social fantasy where people can both imagine gender and see it in the visual materiality of the performances.

These experiences are temporary, but they are not forgotten. Thus, Drag Bingo performs work in merging these new possibilities into the disciplinary realm of the family. As the family begins to incorporate more flexible notions of gender and sexuality, new concepts of gender and sexuality will emerge gradually through the generations.

Is American society moving beyond the male-female binary understanding of the self in contemporary American society? Not really. The male-female polarity is so ingrained in American social practices that we cannot escape its grip on our identities. However, Drag Bingo shows that American society, in particular the family, within this period of late-stage capitalism is beginning to test that polarity, to disturb it but not break it down.

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